

LEE, KRISTINE NOEL, PhD. 'As Separate as if we were in Two Worlds': Working-Class Women's Neglected Labor in Victorian Literature. (2019)
Directed by Dr. Noelle Morrisette. 205 pp.

The field of Victorian studies historically includes critical studies of the working-class, but many of the most recent narrowly focus on men's roles, masculinity, travel, and literacy in relation to the working class. When critics examine working-class women, they frequently focus not on their agency but on the relationship between cultural expectations for women and the problematic sexual and violent associations between women and work during the Victorian period, producing a similarly narrow scope that also treats women as passive entities. These mis-readings and non-readings of working-class women laborers are the point of departure for this study.

This study proposes new forms of labor to re-see women characters in a range of Victorian novels depicting the working class. This project identifies four critical terms for types of labor that working-class women characters engage in as a means of negotiating agency and authority: protective labor, healing/medicinal labor, mental labor of visions and fantasy, and virtuous labor, all of which are kinds of work that go beyond the tasks required by employers. In the texts studied here, working-class women characters navigate tight and marginalized positions, and use these forms of labor as a means of mobility and agency, with varied results. Entering an old text from a new critical direction is precisely the method of this dissertation. It is a way of breaking the masculine-focused tradition of working-class studies, revising ideas of cultural history, and creating an essential act of survival: the reclamation of and rethinking about women's work from the Victorian period.

‘AS SEPARATE AS IF WE WERE IN TWO WORLDS’: WORKING-CLASS WOMEN’S
NEGLECTED LABOR IN VICTORIAN LITERATURE

by

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A Dissertation Submitted to
the Faculty of The Graduate School at
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy

Greensboro
2019

Approved by

Committee Chair

To my loving husband Jesse and the joy of my life Timothy. Thank you for seeing me
through.

Dedicated to the memory of my father, Timothy H. Pugh, and my grandmother, Alice E.
Silver.

APPROVAL PAGE

This dissertation written by Kristine Noel Lee has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful for the opportunity to work with my Chair, Dr. Noelle Morrisette and have benefitted from her guidance on this project, advice, and generosity of spirit. Dr. Katie Peel's knowledge of the Victorian period, current scholarship, and working-class issues have been invaluable to this project. I am deeply appreciative of her encouragement and kindness as a scholar and human. Dr. Nancy Myers has provided thoughtful feedback that has aided my project development. Her questions have kept me thinking and developed my analysis. Dr. Ben Clarke has given me multiple resources and insights on British working-class culture that have shaped my thinking and certainly my approach to labor. Finally, I am thankful for the feedback and support from my friend and colleague Dr. Crystal Matey. You were beside me at the most difficult parts of this process and gave me direction and hope with your thorough questions, encouragement, and knowledge.

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CHAPTER I

CATEGORICALLY DENIED: AN EXAMINATION OF VICTORIAN WORKING
WOMEN AND UNDEREXAMINED LABOR

The field of Victorian studies historically includes critical studies of the working-class, but many of the most recent narrowly focus on men's roles, masculinity, travel, and literacy in relation to the working class.¹ When critics examine working-class women, they frequently focus not on their agency but on the relationship between cultural expectations for women and the problematic sexual and violent associations between women and work during the Victorian period, producing a similarly narrow scope that also treats women as passive entities. Several studies on women participating in factory work and the sweated trades exist, for example, but there are few analyses of women's labor in the mines. These mis-readings and non-readings of working-class women laborers are the point of departure for this study.

This study proposes new forms of labor to re-see women characters in a range of Victorian novels depicting the working class. In her seminal essay, Adrienne Rich calls it "re-vision;" a process that bridges cultural history and survival for women:

Re-vision—the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction—is for us more than a chapter in cultural

¹ See Jean Fernandez's study on the Victorian working-class and literacy, Michelle Strong's text on travel and the civilization of the working class, Julie Marie-Strong's study on fatherhood and the working class, and Y.S. Lee's study on masculinity and the working class.

history: it is an act of survival. Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves... We need to know the writing of the past, and know it differently than we have ever known it; not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us. (18)

What Rich describes—entering an old text from a new critical direction—is precisely the method of this dissertation. It is a way of breaking the masculine-focused tradition of working-class studies, revising ideas of cultural history, and creating an essential act of survival: the reclamation of and rethinking about women’s work from the Victorian period. I define a working-class text as one in which there are central characters from the working class while mindful that novels were largely produced for middle-class readers. Some of these texts studied here were in conversation with working class readers, particularly the work of Frances Hodgson Burnett, which was especially accessible to them. While the scope of this project does not include Victorian working-class poetry, this is an area of research with similar potential to yield new understandings of working-class women and their literary and rhetorical negotiations of agency.

In George Eliot’s *Natural History of the German Life*, she explores the role of the novelist and her/his/their fidelity in representing “the people.” She chastises the incomplete assumptions made about the working-class and asserts that the collective terms used to describe them such as “the people,” “the masses,” “the proletariat,” and “the peasantry” do not convey the complexity of the people:

[These terms] indicate almost as small an amount of concrete knowledge that they are as far from completely representing the complex facts summed up in the collective term...how little the real characteristics of the working-classes are known to those who are outside them, how little their natural history has been

studied, is sufficiently disclosed by our art as well as by our political and social theories (9).

Placing working-class women at the forefront of texts as main characters provides exposure and recognition, but how critics have read them has been limited in complexity, just as these more collective terms have. By examining how working-class women characters expand their roles through these new forms of labor, we recognize the autonomy they secure in terms of obtaining more security, having more access to the community, sometimes achieving a higher social status, gaining more respect, and the ability to avoid the traditional outcomes for many Victorian women, marriage or prostitution. In order to better comprehend these representations of working-class women, we must consider these neglected forms of labor and bring them into the critical conversation. This effort brings more nuance to these characters and our engagement with scholarship on the working class and the current world. As a result, our understandings of 20th and 21st century women's experiences have been enhanced by taking into consideration work such as the "second shift" and emotional labor. Given the overwhelmingly masculine focus of working-class criticism, the value of this focus on working-class women in literature will provide new ways to read literary texts that emphasizes women's multi-faceted labors. These new categories of labor will put the focus back on women's contributions and broaden our current understanding of working-class women in literature.

My goal in this dissertation is to present a study of working-class women's labor that not only establishes new categories of labor that have been underexamined, but also

presents working-class women as more progressive than previously considered. I move away from associating women primarily with domestic labor and sexuality in connection with their work. Patricia Johnson notes that, “These fictions also indicate some of the unresolved problems that followed working-class women, even as they obeyed society and retreated into domesticity” (165). This project presents working-class women who, indeed, face unresolved problems, but do not retreat into domesticity. I structured my project with a focus on two canonical novels and two more obscure novels to demonstrate that these new categories of labor I propose are present in both popular texts as well as those that are less familiar in current literary studies. This new understanding of women’s labor lends literary criticism on working women more depth and complexity.

This project identifies four critical terms for types of labor that working-class women characters engage in as a means of negotiating agency and authority: protective labor, healing/medicinal labor, mental labor of visions and fantasy, and virtuous labor, all of which are kinds of work that go beyond the tasks required by employers. In the texts studied here, working-class women characters navigate tight and marginalized positions, and use these forms of labor as a means of mobility and agency, with varied results.

In *That Lass O’Lowrie’s* (1877), I examine how the main character Joan engages in protective labor to avoid emotional and physical harm for herself and others, acts that challenged gender and class expectations for working-class women during the Victorian period. I define protective labor as any action one takes to keep other and self from harm. This form of labor disrupts gender conventions because Joan is a woman performing protective acts that have typically been associated with men—leading a rescue to recover

those trapped in the mine, and following Derrick, a man who supervises the mine, home to prevent any harm. Additionally, a focus on protective labor allows for consideration of what gender can do; it extends options within the category of working-class woman.

While the trope of women as nurturers is common during the period due to Florence Nightingale² and Mary Seacole,³ I investigate working-class women's healing/medicinal labor in *Mary Barton* (1848) as a response to middle-class stereotypes of the working class as violent and unruly. As the field of medicine became professionalized, such women healing figures emphasized the individual value of each patient, in the process building an authority for themselves that contested the male usurpation of medicine.

Using Dickens' *Our Mutual Friend* (1865), I assert that working-class women in the text, specifically Jenny and Lizzie, practice mental labor through their visions and fantasy, engaging a position of power that calls into question the monstrosity of Victorian society that embraced the oppression, exploitation, and silencing of the working class. These visions and fantasies are re-imaginings of reality that guide an outcome and start the action of intention. As a result, I assert that the narrative and power structures change for these women. These re-imaginings of reality/visions and fantasy serve as a source of

² Nightingale's influence came later in the nineteenth century and, according to David Stanley, "In Britain, after her return from the Crimean War, Florence Nightingale received iconic status...she was a heroine and in an Empire desperate for good news she received almost celebrity status" (2).

³ Jamaican-born Mary Seacole was equally as famed and credible for nursing as Florence Nightingale in other parts of the world but was met with some doubt and prejudice in Britain due to her race and perceived otherness. According to Raphael Dalleo, "Throughout her travels she frequently relies on connections to the powerful to help open doors, at least as frequently, those connections are not enough...[however] while she cannot enter the public sphere localized in England entirely on her own terms, she has sources of authority and symbolic capital that she can deploy to tentatively circumvent the 'authorities' who are not interested in authorizing her" (65).

comfort for self and other characters as well as a tangible display of narrative power and female agency.

I call into question the Victorian ideals of virtue and marriage are through the labor of Nelly in *A City Girl* (1887), providing a social critique of expectations for women in the Victorian period. I define this labor as that which proposes a new type of virtue than those that are traditionally expected that embraces motherhood differently while critiquing the idea that marriage is the ideal outcome for a woman. Through her labor, Nelly creates more visibility for herself and her child, which pushes back against the social structure of anonymity for the working class. Rather than hide the child she had out of wedlock, she instead creates for him the most intricate and noticeable clothes; clothes that would rival those she creates for the middle class through her physical work. This visibility expands her role in terms of gender and class as well—working class women were marginalized, overlooked, and had less power than working men, despite their significant contributions to the workforce. In Nelly's case, she does not place herself or her child in the shadows but strives for visibility. She sets herself apart by bringing her knowledge and sustainability through her sweated labor into her home; she has a desire for more and a goal of sustaining an income for herself and her child that she brings to fruition. By redefining labor through these new categories, I establish a more nuanced understanding of working-class women during the period in terms of the labor they participated in, both within and without the workplace, and what they were potentially capable of as well. My focus is on nineteenth century mis-(or non) readings to working women that could later be applied to working women in 20th and 21st century texts.

The subversions I reveal throughout my project are widespread in Victorian literature, though, so far, largely uncovered. In Jenny Wren and Lizzie, we see reliance on visions and fantasy of their own creation and female friendship; in Alice we witness a breadth of medicinal knowledge and an unwillingness to defer to a conventional married life; in Nelly there is no happy ending with virtuous expectations of marriage and respectability; and in Joan there are challenges to gender and class alongside a loyalty to self-reliance rather than on male companionship. In contrast to the obedient working-class woman that resulted from societal pressure, in these working-class women characters and their labor we see resistance to expected roles and progress that is destined to occur in the future. These characters disrupt conventional narratives and depictions of working-class women in ways that can extend critical commentary on working class women in Victorian literature.

This extension of commentary and understanding is crucial considering that, during the Victorian age, women were treated as second-class citizens, and working-class women were exploited for their work. In his now classic study, Richard Altick notes that,

Life was very different in the working class. Here women, far from living under a glass dome, were part of the labor force, as they always had been in order to help their husbands squeeze out a living...the necessity that drove them to work was more bitter than it had ever been. Their availability in large numbers enabled employers to pay the low wages which, in a vicious circle, required all able-bodied members of a family to work, irrespective of sex or (apart from exceedingly young children) age. Women toiled long hours on the land in season; they worked by their husband's side in the handicraft shops and in the mills and factories; until public outcry more or less put an end to it, they slaved in the mines. Except for children, women were the most exploited of all workers...Whatever their social rank, in the eyes of the law women were second-class citizens. Although there was sporadic discussion of the female franchise, and some mild agitation in its favor, women were at the bottom of the electoral

priority list, and the only concession made to them by the end of the century was the right to vote⁴ in local elections. (56-57)

This passage concisely explains women's position in Victorian society—their work was considered a support for the family through housework, child-birthing and raising, and their remunerated contributions to the national economy were not as accurately documented as those of men. Women's work was overshadowed by men's, and they were relegated either to the home for domestic responsibilities or to the hazardous conditions of the work environment.

Three major shifts occurred in the exposure of working-class circumstances to the general public with the publication of the parliamentary papers on the *Children's Employment Commission* (1842), Engels' *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (1845),⁵ and Henry Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor* (1851). Each of these historical documents establish a scope of working-class women's duties and personal lives for contemporary writers to build on and readers to understand for literary representations of working-class women. Literature of the period was certainly informed by these vital non-fiction texts, which were widely consumed and brought exposure to working-class life that was previously hidden from public view. Each novel I analyze in this dissertation builds on this vital historical context. For example, although they are published thirty years apart, the influence of the parliamentary papers is evident in *That Lass O'Lowrie's* (1877) in the detailed depiction of pit brow labor performed by women

⁴ These rights were, of course, reserved for and more accessible to genteel women and not the lower classes.

⁵ Engels' text was not translated into English for a few decades, therefore, access to it in its original form would be granted to middle-class readers capable of reading the text in the original German.

in the text. Decades before the publication of *The City Girl* (1887), Mayhew's text documents information regarding the sweated trades during the Victorian period. This context of sweated labor is essential for understanding the complexities of Nelly's character in *The City Girl* (1887), who works as a sweated trouser maker. The industrial landscape of Manchester and the circumstances of those working in city environments is only part of what makes Engels's text essential to understanding Alice's position as an herbal medicine woman for the working-class in *Mary Barton* (1848). Mayhew's work on the river people brought recognition to a working-class population that existed completely on the fringes of Victorian society, and this context is useful for understanding Lizzie's position as a woman whose family earned their living from dredging the river in *Our Mutual Friend* (1865). I analyze these novels non-chronologically in order to emphasize and in some cases establish significant changes that occurred over time for the working-class.⁶

Women and Work: Neglected, Removed, and Overlooked

The relationship between women and work is contentious and less examined than that of men and work, which is the result of a masculine emphasis in literary criticism and of industry having masculine roots. The shift from an agricultural/cottage-industry economy to an industrialized one resulted in a conflict with contemporary gender ideology: --since women were relegated to the domestic space, having to leave the house

⁶ For instance, the parliamentary papers outline several testimonials from women miners who performed most of their work in the mines. In *That Lass O'Lowries*, Joan Lowrie is a pit brow lass, and like many other women in the novel, her work is relegated to the mouth of the mine. Her act of going into the mine to perform a rescue after an explosion was revolutionary due to this major shift that occurred following the parliamentary paper release—women and children were no longer allowed to work in the mines.

for work posed a threat to the family and domestic structures of the home. Karl Ittman describes the “masculine public sphere among the working class,” and the reputation of men and masculinity in terms of family provisions (146). Martin A. Danahay explores the masculine associations of industry: “Industriousness in the Victorian period combined connotations of individual effort and industrial production...the word ‘industry’ itself shifted in meaning from the seventeenth century when it meant the application of skill to work, to the early Victorian sense in which it came to mean simply hard work undertaken assiduously and for an extended time” (Danahay 39). Women, however, are part of the very fabric that created a thriving workforce during this period. The representations of female characters I analyze in the following chapters demonstrate that they do, indeed, undertake hard work assiduously and for an extended time. As these authors show, work was distinctly gendered during the Victorian period, and women were systematically removed from consideration as workers precisely *as* they became associated with work. Danahay asserts that Victorian conceptions of work were inherently masculine: “The industry of the Victorian period was therefore imagined⁷ in terms of single, heroic men and large industrial projects that led to ‘the manufacture of useful articles’ (Danahay 43). From this description, it is evident that women were, as Ali Al-haj establishes, under-recognized (14). This masculine conception of labor within the discourse of the period is

⁷ This imagining of industry was the product of middle-class conceptions of work, however, not those who participated in industry, many of whom were women.

problematic, however, given the vast contributions of women to the industrial workforce.⁸

Through careful consideration of women's placement in Victorian industry, I expose the active roles women played in these environments. Women's involvement in industry is always complicated by the physical body at work. Danahay claims that both men's and women's bodies are unstable⁹ due to being subject to desire; however, he makes an important distinction regarding common associations with women's bodies:

Men's bodies at work are 'unstable' because like women's bodies they are subject to desire. The Victorian discourse on work is intertwined with the Victorian discourse on sexuality.... the history of work in the Victorian period is, therefore, the history of the attempt to define work as masculine and the male body as productive and free from the threats of the feminine, idleness and sexuality. The first stage of this definition of work as masculine was symbolically to separate women from work... (Danahay 45)

Here, Danahay rightly identifies this attempt to symbolically separate women from work during the period, and significantly references the connections between women's work and sexuality that were common in the Victorian age. It is important to note that this symbolic separation was meant for women participating in wage labor rather than labor performed in domestic spaces for the benefit of the family, which Danahay distinguishes, in this case, by focusing on the profession of sewing: "What makes this act of sewing "work" is its status as labor carried out for money on behalf of people outside of the

⁸ The parliamentary papers indicate that women contributed to all the major workforces in industry, including factory work, textiles, agriculture, and other forms of work.

⁹ For women, Danahay establishes that, "For women to work was often represented as releasing a dangerous sexuality rather than repressing sexual desire...for women it was seen as an inappropriate libidinal activity" (7).

family. It is the intervention of money and market that marks what these women are doing as ‘work’” (Danahay 55).¹⁰

Perhaps the most critical observation made by Danahay is the association of women working and dying as a result, which referenced a greater cultural anxiety in the Victorian period. Danahay cites the artist Richard Redgrave and his visual depictions of women at work: “Redgrave was not the only one to depict women dying thanks to their work, and in his representation is reacting to a wider cultural anxiety about women and work” (Danahay 50). This cultural anxiety is implicit in how women are portrayed in literature in terms of work. In the following chapters, I illustrate that although this association is frequently present, women characters in fictional texts begin to emerge as more frequently in control of their labor. Additionally, they are more capable of using it to their advantage for significant breaks from cultural expectations for women. The feminine ideal upheld by Victorian society was markedly middle-class. Thus, working-class women were destined to violate it given the necessity that they work outside of the home to support their families. Working class families required multiple incomes to be sustainable, whereas middle-class homes were often dependent on a single male income as head of household, thereby allowing women in these homes a more substantial, primarily domestic role.

¹⁰ While Danahay is referring to Richard Redgrave’s paintings *The Sempstress* (1844) and *The Poor Teacher* (1843) and Thomas Hood’s poem “The Song of the Shirt” (1843) as examples of efforts to portray women’s work in a positive light, they argue that their efforts inadvertently reinforced the idea of women working as fatal: “their immensely popular images suggested that to enter the ‘cash nexus’ of waged work was fatal to women, and thus only men should undertake waged labor” (Danahay 49).

Elizabeth Langland emphasizes the pressure of cultural expectations for women and contends that, “cultural events cannot be understood apart from politics, history, and economics...[we are required] to engage other ways of thinking about novels, to see narratives as discursive practices bound up in and implicated in other discursive practices through which a culture’s meanings are articulated” (3). I apply this idea by establishing the autonomy of women characters who undergo evolutions and have influence in a variety of ways over the action of the text and others. Examining novels with this focus on autonomy revises women’s roles and expands our understanding of their complexity and cultural influence both within the home, in the workplace, and in their chosen professions. Fictional texts as well as parliamentary testimonials are shaped by negative expectations and associations with women and work. For instance, in the testimonials, some of the women interviewed were still evaluated based on their roles in domestic spaces and as mothers. In one testimonial, a woman interviewed is described as not only delicate in feature, but also skilled with domestic labor and residing in a neat and tidy space, despite her long hours of labor (Parliament 40). In this example, the cultural ideas of beauty as well as the expectation for women’s maintenance of the home are present.

Representations of women in fictional texts convey these evaluative discourses of the period as well. In *Mary Barton*, the expectations for women in terms of marriage are still present, but Gaskell critiques the pursuit of being a lady. Scholars including Ginger Frost have established that legal/religious marriage was not always the custom in working-class communities, and the peak of common-law marriages coincided with the state of the economy: “the working class had a more tolerant attitude [toward marriage]

than the middle class...common law marriages peaked between 1829 and 1842, when the economy was most depressed” (3,123). Langland argues that the Victorian angel in the house figure performs a more significant role than expected by way of her managerial¹¹ position: “...A Victorian wife, the presiding hearth angel of Victorian social myth, actually performed a more significant and extensive economic and political function than is usually perceived...Whereas men earned the money, women had the important task of managing those funds towards the acquisition of social and political status” (Langland 8). In contrast to Langland’s assertions regarding the more extensive economic and political function that women perform in the middle class, working-class women in the texts I examine throughout this project manage their labor in other arenas. While Langland’s aim is fixated on “read[ing] narrative form both for its reproduction of ideology and for its revelations of the paradoxes and contradictions in representations of the Victorian Angel,”¹² my purpose is to reveal and expand the roles of working women (Langland 12). Langland situates the middle-class subjects of her study alongside those in the working class with a reference to Ann Oakley’s book *Woman’s Work*:

‘The idea that work outside the home for married women was a ‘misfortune and a disgrace’ became acceptable to the working classes only in the last decade of the nineteenth century. In the early years of the twentieth century working class married women were increasingly likely to follow the middle-class pattern, choosing the role of non-employed housewife even in cases where their

¹¹ This managerial position of women in the domestic space is furthered by Kathryn Hughes, who asserts that Mrs. Beeton repackaged domesticity with her efforts as a women’s magazine journalist with her household guide (2).

¹² Langland identifies the home as an indicator of social status and power: “Social status was marked not only on the woman’s person and in her social demeanor but in her sanctum and sanctuary, the home. The Victorian home became a physical theater for staging one’s social status...” (Langland 41). In Chapter 3 of this project, I will apply this concept to Jenny Wren as the ‘person of the house’ in *Our Mutual Friend*, however, I argue that her status and power is also present in other spaces outside of the domestic sphere.

employment would have improved the family's standard of living' (50). Such is the power of cultural ideology that working-class women were persuaded to jeopardize their economic well-being. Furthermore, Oakley recognizes the phenomenon I have explored here, that 'middle-class wives chose housewifery as an occupation long before their working-class sisters partly because they did not actually have to *do* housework' (51).' (248)

Here, Langland, along with her reference to Oakley, establishes that married working-class women shifted to accepting the idea of working outside of the home as a “misfortune and a disgrace” at the end of the nineteenth century. While my primary focus is on novels, I engage texts such as the parliamentary papers as well. Each of these texts refer to representations of working women, including married women, who are not only balancing the demands of the domestic space, but are also performing work largely outside the home. There was growing concern regarding how well domestic duties would be achieved by working women; one anxiety was that women would neglect their duties and homelife, thus resulting in society suffering in all areas, from sanitation to morality. These working women do not consider their work a “misfortune and a disgrace,” and do not give up their work outside of the home to be a housewife. Langland traces patterns of agency in domestic spheres for middle-class women, but my project identifies agency and autonomy for working-class women.

Frequently, readers consider the women represented in primary Victorian texts as sacrificial figures lacking agency, offering up their bodies, their energies, and their talents for the service of their labor.¹³ Working-class women in literature are frequently

¹³ Joan Perkins' chapters “Obliged to be Breadwinners: The Lives of Married Women Workers” as well as “Cheap Labour: The Lives of Unmarried Working-class Women” in *Victorian Women* clearly illustrate these expectations of sacrifice.

engrossed in their work to the point of dire consequences, and often under the oppression of masculine authority. With this reading, women are often represented as not occupying a space where choices are possible, but rather fulfilling their prescribed roles without question or, at times, without meaningful action that has significant impact on the events of the text. We read these characters as sacrificial because they are frequently associated with what they give up (bodies/time/youth) to provide for others, be it for the workplace, their families, or other pursuits. These associations between women and sacrifice are deeply rooted in critical and historical sources. Historical documents such as guidebooks and periodicals provided extensive commentary on the expected functions of women in society. In addition to the association with the confines of the domestic sphere, female characters have also been viewed as easily manipulated and coerced or solely dependent on male direction or power. However, the working-class women I examine in the following chapters operate outside of their socially ascribed roles; they expand and disrupt these roles by creating new forms of labor. They occupy subversive spaces and, instead of being influenced by men, strike out on their own; in cases like that of Jenny Wren, Dickens' clever doll's dressmaker in *Our Mutual Friend*, they even demonstrate dominance over male authority. Historically, there was a very specific idea of what roles a middle-class woman should fulfill, which primarily included domestic laborer and caregiver. The act of working was, for women, critiqued, and as seen in the testimonials in chapter one of this project, they were still expected to perform domestic labor. When domestic responsibilities were not completed in the expected ways, working women came under additional critique. For example, Jenny Wren could certainly be interpreted

as a sacrificial character because of the role she has caring for her father, but she is interpreted in this study as an active agent who manipulates visions and fantasies to bring about desired results in her life and those of others.

Simon Morgan observes that our understanding of the Victorian gendered concept of separate spheres is problematic and that the perception that women are restricted to a domestic sphere is an incomplete idea of their roles: “Historians of women have emphasized the inconsistencies and subversive possibilities inherent in discourses of domesticity, and the way that women were able to exploit these to expand their role” (Morgan 2). Mindful of Morgan’s critique, in this dissertation, I approach a variety of texts with the critical focus on underexamined labor, specifically investigating how women perform labor in strategic, unconventional, and unanticipated ways. This focus expands their roles and establishes working-class women characters as varied beyond domestic and physical work. Morgan also notes that “...in the face of mounting empirical evidence of women’s activities beyond the home, and indeed of the often ‘public’ functions of the family unit itself, such arbitrary and ill-defined distinctions become increasingly difficult to sustain” (Morgan 3). I intend to disrupt the idea of women only performing the expected labors of physical and domestic work, and to fill the gap by providing critical understanding of these underexamined forms of women’s labor.

Victorian Contexts: Engels and Mayhew

While many prominent writers of the Victorian period addressed the issues of the working class, the studies of the working class completed by Friedrich Engels and Henry Mayhew are widely considered to be touchstones of the field. Mayhew painstakingly

preserved the words of those he interviewed across detailed accounts in four volumes, and his work successfully inspired social reform. Influenced by his time living in Manchester during the Industrial Revolution, Engels's *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (1845) exposed the dire working conditions and circumstances of the working class in England. This text brought socialist principles to light as methods to possibly relieve the burdens of the working poor. Both Mayhew and Engels' texts remain in wide circulation, and when they were published these texts became the impetus for social change as well as an accessible way to inform the middle-class reading public about the conditions of those working to support the industrial growth experienced in Victorian Britain at the time. Mayhew and Engels shaped the major Victorian concepts of labor and exposed conditions that were long in need of reform. This historical context provides vital groundwork for my argument for a focus on women's labor and how it is represented in literature. Tied to the working-class women characters I analyze in this dissertation; these two primary sources provide non-fictional accounts of women in the working-class and establish the duties of working women in shared positions to those women I analyze in literature. Additionally, these sources establish working-class portrayals to build on and compare to literary representations of working-class women.

Friedrich Engels' *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (1845) provides a perspective that he gained from his interactions with the working class during his time at his father's cotton mills in Manchester between 1842 and 1844. Additionally, his work was "supported by reading masses of parliamentary papers, statistical reports, and pamphlets, as well as the increasing number of books dealing with the social question. He

also got to know the Chartists and Owenites and involved himself in local politics” (Engels xiii). By his own admission, his perspective was that of an outsider/ “foreigner,” which placed him in a complicated position—he made it his responsibility to inform the civilized world of the degradation of the working class.¹⁴ Engels described himself as an outsider and “foreigner” because he was both middle-class and literally foreign to England, having come from Germany to live and fulfill an apprenticeship in industrial Manchester between the years of 1842 and 1844. Writing a readable, complete text on working class issues was one of his primary aims. He began this work with a letter to the working classes of Great Britain, and detailed his immersive study and what he gained from the process:

I have lived long enough amidst you to know something about your circumstances; I have devoted to their knowledge my most serious attention, I have studied the various official and non-official documents as far as I was able to get hold of them—I have not been satisfied with this, I wanted more than a mere *abstract* knowledge of my subject, I wanted to see you in your own homes, to observe you in your everyday life, to chat with you on your condition and grievances, to witness your struggles against the social and political power of your oppressors. I have done so: I forsook the company and the dinner-parties, the port wine and champagne of the middle classes, and devoted my leisure hours almost exclusively to the intercourse with plain Working Men; I am both glad and proud of having done so. (Engels 9)

Engels’ approach was radical precisely because he did not base his conclusions only on his readings, but also used his interactions and relationships. What sets his work apart is

¹⁴ The book was originally released in German. In his letter to the working classes at the beginning of his text, Engels inquires: “Have they done as much as to compile from those rotting Blue Books a single readable book from which everybody might easily get some information...those are the things they do not like to speak of—they have left it to a foreigner to inform the civilized world of the degrading situation you have to live in” (Engels 10).

his willingness to include the results of his conversations on the struggles, oppressions, and grievances of the working class, instead of adopting a removed middle-class view of their circumstances.¹⁵ He determined that all class issues were essentially the result of economic demands, and he observed the working classes not just in their homes and workplaces, but in their everyday lives, wherever that took them. Engels was able to successfully immerse himself in their environments, and subsequently, to view them in their utmost complexities rather than as mere statistics or descriptions in a book. Engels was able to capture lesser noticed elements of the workers he observed and combine his work in a comprehensive study that was accessible and available to the public. David McLellan outlines the circulation and reputation of the text:

From the date of its publication Engels's book attracted considerable attention in Germany, and to a lesser extent Russia. There was much praise for its style and its accurate observations, but much opposition to its revolutionary conclusions... [a translation was published in 1887 in the United States] and 1892 for the same translation to appear in Britain. It was only with the spread of socialism that Engel's book became widely read. (xvii)

Although the circulation of the book took time to reach other areas of the world, it remains a widely respected examination of the working-class and has been continuously in print ever since its initial publication. *The Conditions of the Working Class in England* brought a more detailed and humanized study of the working class to the forefront of the discussion of working-class issues.

¹⁵ His groundbreaking work published in 1845 paved the way for other texts that included more than mere statistics or abstracts about the working class, including Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor*, published in 1851.

Regarding working-class women, Engels diverted the masculine focus of working-class studies to a degree by including information about the contributions of women to the workforce that had been overlooked or intentionally hidden. For example, Engels exposed the prominence of women in uncredited positions, performing much of the labor in spinning mills:

In the spinning-mills, women and girls are to be found in almost exclusive possession of the throstles¹⁶...and several piecers for tying the threads, usually children or women...at the power looms women, from 15-20 years, are chiefly employed...among the preparatory machinery, too, women alone are to be found, with here and there a man to clean and sharpen the carding-frames...but the actual work of the mills is done by women and children. This the manufacturers deny. (Engels 151)

In this section, Engels emphasizes the refusal of manufacturers to acknowledge women's position in the workplace, and how their contributions made this work possible. While women were running the mills, it was easier for manufacturers to focus on the labor being performed by men, lest they be judged by the public for exploiting women and children. By including this intricate description of women in essential positions for every aspect of the spinning mills, Engels not only attached more value to their labor,¹⁷ but also clearly outlined women as the backbone of industrial England.¹⁸

In his "Preface" to *London Labour and the London Poor* (1851), Henry Mayhew outlines the importance of documenting the lives of those in the working-class. At the

¹⁶ For context, a throstle is a machine used for spinning cotton or wool in a constant fashion.

¹⁷ Engels establishes that "...women and children work more cheaply, and in these branches, better than men..." (Engels 151).

¹⁸ Even in tables presented to the public, the presence of women was intentionally hidden: "But the manufacturers are very careful not to tell us, how many of the adults were men and how many women. And this is just the point...still they have not the courage to tell the whole truth" (Engels 151-152).

time of its publication, his work had a wide influence on readers and drastically increased sales of periodicals when his work was included. Sarah Roddy contends that,

When Mayhew is remembered, it is overwhelmingly for his 82 articles on 'Labour and the Poor' that appeared in *The Morning Chronicle*, 1849-1850, and his subsequent undertaking *London Labour and the London Poor* (2 vols, 1851; reissued with additions, 1861, 1862, 1864, and 1865). These collections were, and are, important texts on London, labour and the plebian people in the mid-nineteenth century. (2)

Mayhew's legacy continues, and certainly his work influenced authors during the period and informed their writing on the working class. While he was certainly not the first to notice the need for this insight into and exposure of working lives, Mayhew articulates his intention, "To publish the description of their labour, their earnings, their trials, and their sufferings, in their own 'unvarnished' language; to portray the condition of their homes and their families by personal observation of the places, and direct communion with the individuals" (Mayhew xv). Mayhew's investigative reports established a standard of inquiry into working class life and revealed to the reading public the need for more attention and change to their conditions. He considered it a history of the people. For example, Mayhew establishes the education levels, products sold, social position, and marital status of women street-sellers, and notes that several are not legally married, which was a common instance for the working class. Mayhew's interviews with women throughout his two volumes were one of the first instances of including women's voices on their working-class experience.

Chapter Abstracts: Broadening the Scope of Women's Labor

In the following chapters, I explore underexamined forms of working-class women's labor in Victorian texts spanning from parliamentary testimonials to novels, though my primary engagement is with fictional novels. I demonstrate the ways in which working-class women characters make significant breaks with the limited ideas of labor prominent during the period. Instead of recognizing women's labor primarily in domestic and physical spheres, I present new forms of labor in each text that are commonly unexamined or have been given very little attention in current scholarship. Through these newly proposed forms of labor I underscore how our understanding of conventional forms of labor need to be expanded. Examining these new forms of labor reshapes the critical understanding of working-class labor in the Victorian era overall by placing women's labor at the forefront and promoting a shift where women become the focus of studies in a field where masculine working-class studies are dominant. Working class studies are problematized by this shift of focus, allowing for wider interpretation and application of these forms of labor. Middle class ideals are disrupted by working class realities through this study. Public labor has often been the critical focus for working class women, but private work is equally as significant, and each of these women characters performs labor in public and private spaces. These women expand roles of gender and class by reclaiming spaces that have historically been associated with precarity; for these women, the workplace and the street do not present danger, but rather autonomy.

I have arranged these chapters not chronologically, but instead with a concentration on the variety of labor for women, which reveals their different endeavors to create and extend their agency while working within the constraints of gender and class. Many working class studies focus on factory labor, for instance, so I have organized my chapters based on women who participate in less examined and dual labors: for Joan, mining and protective labor, for Alice, a washerwoman and healer, for Lizzie, body retriever on the river and paper mill worker and creator of visions/fantasy/re-imaginings, for Jenny, dolls dressmaker and visions/fantasy/re-imagining, for Nelly, sweated trouser maker, mother, and creator of virtuous labor. Arranging the chapters in this way expands ideas of women's labor and demonstrates the ways in which women gain autonomy through their labors that are less seen and out of the public eye.

I begin this work by examining the ways in which working-class women, specifically Joan Lowrie, challenge gender and class expectations in Frances Hodgson Burnett's *That Lass O'Lowrie's*. For the purposes of chapter one, I consider protective labor, which Joan participates in to protect others and herself from physical or emotional harm. Significantly, she performs this labor not only in her private home by making herself responsible for the safety and well-being of her friend and her daughter, but also in the mine when she performed a rescue of men that had been trapped by an explosion. Most revolutionary is her protective labor in the street; she is quite literally a street walker for much of the novel, but she is not accompanied by a male companion and comfortable being alone. She is unafraid and does not engage in sex work, rather she

follows a supervisor from the mine Derrick, to keep him safe from an attack. Her protective labor in the street changes ideas of Victorian fear associated with the street—for Joan, it is used for her purposes and not a space associated with fear. I especially focus on those protective acts that challenge gender and class expectations of the period to emphasize the significant progress Burnett achieved with her first novel in terms of re-creating the image of the working-class mining woman. Joan is a character who challenges her gender and class by becoming a protector for other women in her community, a man in a powerful position as an Engineer for the mine, Derrick Fergus, and eventually, herself. In this chapter, I analyze the parliamentary testimonials of mining women, focusing on the implicit contrasts with protective labor in the novel and exploring the significant impact of *That Lass O'Lowrie's* had in shaping Victorian discourse on mining women and the working class more broadly. Working class women's plight could become a symbol for that of men's, thereby shifting the emphasis on the masculinity of working-class literary criticism. I establish the new/late century image of the working-class woman through analysis of Joan's protective labor as well as her challenges to gender and class.

In chapter two I engage *Mary Barton*; specifically, the portrayal of medical women in the working-class with a focus on the complex position of the character Alice. I argue that despite the disenfranchisement of their class, healing labor performed by the working class in the novel places them in positions of power in a healing community of their own making rather than one that is only sometimes available to them, as was the case with professional medical practitioners. Healing labor establishes authority for Alice

in her community and sets up a division between professional medical men and women healers. The differences in how they practice medicine is established by the specificity Alice insists on for her treatments; she adapts medicine, healing practices, and a holistic approach to the individual. Professional medical doctors in the text, however, offer general treatments for patients they have not taken time to thoroughly examine or know due to the stigma of treating the working class. In Victorian literature there is a denigration of healing roles for women that makes them blend into the background of the text and servant-like in caregiving, however, Alice is always noticeable and sought out for her body of knowledge and practical application skills. She embraces this notoriety in her community. What I call “healing labor” in this chapter is any deliberate action a character takes to heal or attempt to heal another character physically. I argue that working class women—and men as well--participate in healing labor, effectively disproving these middle- class ideologies associating the working-class with unruliness, violence, and danger.

Underexamined mental labor is the focus of chapter three, in which I explore the positions of working-class characters Jenny Wren and Lizzie in Dickens’ *Our Mutual Friend*. By presenting these women as creators of visions and fantasy, I argue that Dickens reveals the monstrosity of the society that continued to oppress the working-classes, gives power to those considered the least powerful in society, and broadens roles for women beyond the conventional ones of wife and mother. Specifically, examination of Lizzie begins the work of including racial difference in working class studies; working class characters at the center of critical studies are largely white, including Jenny Wren.

Lizzie's race is ambiguous, and it has been established by Victorian scholars that Irishness was othered during the Victorian period, but there is still much work to be done for future research to apply my findings to working class women of color in Victorian texts. Unlike their male counterparts, these women in the novel, through their visions and fantasy, alter or create their own fate and that of others, in a direct response to the changing roles and conditions of Victorian working-class women. These visions are an attempt to gain authority and control; it allows them one way to re-write their fate in a culture that places them in limited, oppressed roles.

One of the most commonly held expectations for women in the Victorian period was to uphold virtue, and in chapter four, I focus on working-class women's labor of virtue in a text with only one critical edition, Margaret Harkness's *A City Girl*. By examining the ways in which virtue is portrayed in Harkness's 1887 novel *A City Girl*, I argue that the representation of the working-class character Nelly challenges expectations of virtuous women in terms of marriage and domesticity, as well as offering a critique of the idea that women were restored to virtue through marriage. She presents virtue as self-employment and creates a new form of family that deviates from traditional models during the period with her female roommate and child. Given the obscurity of this text, few critics have written on it and for my purposes, I primarily engage Tabitha Sparks and Sally Ledger, who reference Nelly's significance in the novel. This separation from traditional virtue and critique of marriage revises our critical understanding of women during the late Victorian period.

CHAPTER II

NO HALF-SAVAGE EXISTENCE: WOMEN'S PROTECTIVE LABOR IN *THAT*

LASS O'LOWRIE'S

They did not look like women, or at least a stranger new to the district might easily have been misled by their appearance, as they stood together in a group, by the pit's mouth. There were about a dozen of them there—all "pit girls;" as they were called, women who wore a dress more than half masculine, and who talked loudly and laughed discordantly, and some of whom, God knows, had faces as hard and brutal as the hardest of their collier brothers and husbands and sweethearts. They had lived among the coal-pits and had worked early and late at the 'mouth,' ever since they had been old enough to take part in the heavy labor...there was no element of softness to rule or even influence them in their half-savage existence. (Burnett 1)

These opening lines of Frances Hodgson Burnett's *That Lass O'Lowrie's* (1877) presents a complicated image of pit-lasses in the Victorian age; their deviation from social expectations for women and their rugged appearance strayed greatly from the ideal Victorian woman. The middle-class ideal of Coventry Patmore's angel in the house shaped societal expectations for women, and according to Diana Archibald, "...The 'home' functions both as an oasis for men in the midst of the cruel world...and as a fortress protecting women from contamination by that world...According to Patmore and to many of his contemporaries, woman's natural domain is the home, and a woman's fulfillment lies at the hearthside" (5). The women who live this 'half-savage existence' bear the hardship of lives spent engrossed in their work outside the home and the pain of loss from generations of their families dying early. Associated with deprivation,

drunkenness, and deviant behavior, the working-class men and women in this text seem to support stereotypes of the working-class. The heroine of the text, however, is immediately set apart by her actions and the challenges she presents to her perceived status due to her gender and class. Unlike other characters, Joan is not duped into a relationship with a man in a powerful position at the coal mine, nor is she willing to engage in violence. Instead, Joan serves as an atypical heroine created by Burnett who demonstrates a new image of the Victorian working-class woman. I argue that Joan blurs gender lines through her appearance and actions, specifically her choices to engage in protective labor for others. I especially focus on those protective acts that challenge gender and class expectations of the period to establish the significant progress Burnett achieved with her first novel in terms of re-creating the image of the working-class mining woman. For the purposes of this chapter, I consider protective labor to be that which Joan participates in to protect others and herself from physical or emotional harm.

Burnett's first published novel *That Lass O'Lowrie's* takes place in the small mining village of Riggan at an ambiguous period of time, however, it is evident that it is post 1840 since women are no longer allowed to work inside the mines. The main character of the novel, Joan Lowrie, is a pit brow lass who works at the mouth of the mine collecting coal. The daughter of an abusive alcoholic, Joan is often beaten and turned out of her home. Although she endures various forms of abuse at her father's will, she is presented as a strong, resilient woman who cuts ties with him early in the novel until his reappearance near the end. She is a leader for the other pit brow lasses, and she directly influences their decision making and acceptance of outliers in the community.

Given the religious influence of the classist Rector Barholm and the gracious Reverend Paul Grace, she establishes herself as independent from the expectations placed on her by the Rector's efforts and encourages Reverend Paul to resist the discriminatory leadership of Rector Barholm. She demonstrates compassion by opening her home to a fallen woman Liz, and her baby, who would have been homeless otherwise. Although Liz eventually left her child with Joan and the child died not much later, Joan's loyalty to and caring for Liz remained. Following Liz's return to Riggan and her near immediate death, Joan decided she no longer had an obligation to stay there and sought out a new life. This novel follows her development as a character from pit brow lass to student, eventually resulting in class advancement with her move south and her new position as assistant to a wealthy Mrs. Galloway in the town of Ashley-Wold. Following this move she is in a much more secure position with plenty of influence, and while she is offered a proposal of marriage by an Engineer from the mine, Derrick Fergus, she replies with a determined "not yet." Joan expands traditional gender and class expectations by performing the work of protection not only for Derrick, but also for Liz and her child, as well as herself. Demonstrating the capability and autonomy of women in the working class, Joan is significantly never tied to the roles of mother or wife throughout the novel and builds professionalization on her own funds and motivations.

That Lass O'Lowrie's was popular following its initial serial release in *Scribner's Monthly Magazine*, and only gained more traction when released as a novel (Bolton 100). Best known for her novels *Little Lord Fauntleroy* (1885), *The Little Princess* (1905), and *The Secret Garden* (1910), Burnett's first published novel was *That Lass O'Lowrie's* in

1877. Initially, she had experienced some success with her short story writing. She used her earnings to help support her family after the loss of her father following their move to America from Britain, and the popularity of her first novel was widespread. According to Francis Molson, her first novel was critically acclaimed:

About *That Lass O'Lowrie's*, for instance, the *Atlantic*, 40 (Nov 1877), 630-631, had said, "We shall not be surprised to find Mrs. Burnett, in the future, taking a place—not on just the same grounds, but by virtue of merits of her own—with Charlotte Brontë and Mrs. Gaskell among the few eminent women novelists who we distinguish from good masculine novelists only that we may pay them an added reverence." Richard White, *North American Review*, 128 (Jan 1879), 97-110, was so impressed that he ranked *That Lass O'Lowrie's* ahead of *The Europeans* and *Daisy Miller*, called it the 'flower and crown' of recent fiction, and decided that no contemporary writer surpassed Burnett in "vividness and strength of imagination". (qtd. Molson 35-36)

As part of a grouping with Charlotte Brontë and Elizabeth Gaskell, Burnett was evidently widely read and respected for her talent and technique. Her writing talent was marked by an authenticity that was captured by her first-hand experience of her encounters with working-class life in Manchester over the course of her childhood. Mary Sebeg-Montefiore notes that, "Although [Burnett was] so young when she left Manchester, its nuances and cadences had lodged in her excellent memory... [the novel] was inspired by a childhood memory of a majestic, ragged girl from the Islington Square backstreets" (71). Reading audiences yearned for seemingly authentic accounts of working-class life in fiction. The parliamentary papers were completed by commissioners that went into industrial, rural, and mining workplaces to gather information and interview workers, and the release of these documents whet the appetite of the reading public for accounts of working-class life. These findings, however, were shaped by the biases of the

commissioners doing the work. The parliamentary papers outline several testimonials from women miners who performed most of their work in the mines. In *That Lass O'Lowries*, Joan Lowrie is a pit brow lass, and like many other women in the novel, her work is relegated to the mouth of the mine. Her act of going into the mine to perform a rescue after an explosion was revolutionary due to this major shift that occurred following the parliamentary paper release—women and children were no longer allowed to work in the mines. Following the publication of the parliamentary papers in 1842,¹⁹ reading audiences defined “authentic” stories of the working-class by what they had read in that venue, despite the fact that these testimonials had sections redacted and changed and were always presented through the findings of the commissioners—white men who viewed mining work in particular as vulgar and rife with sexuality. Burnett delivered with women at the forefront as the heroines in some of her short stories and later, her novels—Joan Lowrie is no exception. Released during a period of contention regarding women’s right to work, *That Lass O'Lowrie's* presents a character that defied all the judgements placed on working women. Another marker of the notoriety of this first novel came with dramatic renditions following publication success. In his comprehensive study of dramatic interpretations of Victorian women’s writing, H. Philip Bolton notes the immediate popularity of her novel and the subsequent dramatic reinterpretations that were playing throughout London: “Mrs. Burnett had some habit of dramatizing her novels, and perhaps even conceiving of them secretly as plays even while she wrote them

¹⁹ For the purposes of this chapter, I refer to *the First Report of the Children's Employment Commission* published in 1842.

as novels...several plays based on Burnett's *That Lass O'Lowrie's* appeared in 1877" (100).²⁰ Burnett became well-known for having high standards in regard to her material being protected by copyright law and was a fierce advocate for author protections, and her advocacy was supported by the press (Cheetham).

Despite the wide readership and popularity of this text during the period, to date there is no scholarly edition of this text with annotations or corollary materials. However, it is vital that scholars revisit these underexamined works and, as Brenda Ayres contends,

...reassess the novels by British Victorian writers whose work, although many of them best-sellingly successful, failed to survive into the twentieth century...most have not received the serious readership and scholarship they deserve...invaluable perspectives have been lost because of the exclusion of these works from Victorian studies. Once retrieved, they both positively complicate and clarify notions of nineteenth-century life. (xiv)

Although these complicated depictions of the working-class are present in *That Lass O'Lowrie's*, this is a work that has been largely ignored in Victorian studies, with extremely few critical texts. According to Molson, *Lass* was enthusiastically welcomed as a sympathetic study of the British working class that launched comparisons between Burnett and Dickens, clearly delineating her success and recognition (35).²¹ Despite this appreciation that occurred during the period of its release, it remains underexamined in Victorian studies today in light of Burnett's other works. What little critical work has

²⁰ Bolton extensively lists dramatic interpretations of *Lass* and other plays based on the collected works of Burnett (100).

²¹ Molson cites the comparison to Dickens as coming directly from R.H. Stoddard, "in an essay on Burnett, *Critic* (17 December 1881), 346-347, [and] said that she reminded him of Dickens because of the 'profound sympathy' she had for the lower classes; further, she understood her 'suffering and sinning characters as fully as Dickens ever understood his'" (36).

been done on this piece is relegated to brief mentions in studies of her more well-known works or biographical texts. One of the primary features that sets this novel apart is the inclusion of Joan Lowrie as the main character, a woman miner who defies the negative stereotypes associated with mining work and holds an influential and powerful position among the pit brow lasses, miners, and religious officials in Riggan.

Although she occupied a powerful position in the community, Joan is not without her complications. Patricia Johnson explains the value of a heroine in an industrial setting, but addresses the complications with her character in light of her endurance of abuse:

Frances Hodgson Burnett's *That Lass O'Lowrie's* (1877) provides one of the few nineteenth-century representations of a heroine who works in an industrial setting. Joan Lowrie, a pit-brow lass who picks coal on the surface of the mines, is gifted with courage and beauty and seems at times to shatter both class and gender barriers. But...Joan's coalminer father beats her regularly, and Joan's bruises appear right at the juncture of class and gender distinctions. (134)

Joan certainly shatters class and gender barriers, and I further Johnson's claims by arguing that critics should put more emphasis on these breaks with class and gender. This new image takes the fascination with pit-brow lasses that was popular during the period and asserts not only their physical capability, but their significant mental capabilities as well. Ultimately, I assert that this new image of the Victorian mining woman provided an important break with misunderstandings of mining women's roles as pit-brow lasses that had been mistakenly conflated with women who worked inside the mines. In Joan, readers witnessed a working-class woman who is classified first as strong, intelligent, and loyal, not just physically beautiful and domesticated. The middle-class ideal for women

permeated Victorian society,²² and according to Joan Burstyn, “The ideal woman was to be responsible for organizing the household, bringing up the children, and providing tranquility to which men returned to as a haven of peace from the turbulent world outside” (32). In contrast, popular narratives perpetuated stereotypes of coal-mining women as uncivilized, weak, and wracked with disease, and these stereotypes were solidified in the public opinion by the parliamentary papers *Employment of Children* reports (1842). These images remained static in the public psyche, resulting in the push to excise women and children from work in the mines. In response to these representations, Burnett presented a character who challenges her gender and class by becoming a protector for other women in her community, a man in a powerful position as an Engineer for the mine, Derrick Fergus, and eventually, herself. Joan is a subversive character and challenges the oppression of working-class systems and gender expectations for women. She does this by pursuing education, leaving a workplace that would eventually break down her body, going into the mine when needed for a rescue, and creating partnerships with women rather than getting married and starting a family. Additionally, she subverts expectations for women by spending most of her time outside of the home, either at the pit brow or on the major road in Riggan. In this chapter, I analyze the parliamentary testimonials of mining women with a focus on illuminating the implicit contrasts to protective labor in the novel and explore the significant impact of *That Lass O’Lowrie’s*

²² While these stereotypical women’s roles were breaking down in England in 1877 and beyond, the novel’s time period is ambiguous and some previous expectations for women are perpetuated throughout the novel. For example, Anice Barholm is often found in her home or those of others nurturing in some way, fulfilling expectations of domesticity and nurturing prevalent for women. Additionally, the pit brow women featured in the novel clearly establish their rejection of women who are unmarried with children and fulfill expectations as caregivers following the explosion in the mine.

in terms of shaping Victorian discourse on mining women and the working class more broadly. I establish the new image of the working-class woman through analysis of Burnett's protective labor that Joan enacts as well as her challenges to gender and class.

Blue Book Testimonials: Stark Contrasts with Joan Lowrie

Known for their noticeable blue covers, the Parliamentary Papers, also called Blue Books, were frequently published during the Victorian period with some being forgotten in warehouses and others reaching the highest reading rates possible. According to Oz Frankel, while the public seemed quite satisfied with newspaper and journal excerpts and press reports in most cases, the royal Commission report on the employment of children in the mines of England and Wales (1842) was exceptional for its staggeringly high readership:

[It was] the most widely read government publication of the era. This text perfected a particularly tantalizing genre of social reporting, featuring shocking testimonies of children accompanied by sensational illustrations of half-naked women pushing trolleys in dark mineshafts. It sold over 10,000 copies, many of which private entrepreneurs printed...it had been common among booksellers to produce octavo editions of the most popular official documents...it was argued that the purpose of publishing these documents was their wide diffusion. (312)

Due to this wide readership and publication in *The Westminster Review*, a popular periodical read by intellectuals and those in powerful positions during the time, laws were put in place following publication specifically to remove women from working in the mines. Women's testimonials were coupled with those of children in the *Children's Employment* parliamentary papers, emphasizing the lack of focus on women's specific hardships in working communities. One common thread throughout the parliamentary

reports in *Children's Employment* is that of illness and the mental, emotional, and domestic labor required to continue the physical work. A variety of physical ailments including miscarriage, heart trouble, lung issues, and skin rashes are included in the reports, and along with these physical discrepancies, mental illness/fatigue are frequently mentioned. Mining women were described this way in the parliamentary papers:

One of the most disgusting sights I have ever seen was that of young females, dressed like boys in trousers, crawling on all fours, with belts around their waists and chains passing between their legs...in one near New Mills the chain, passing high up between the legs of two of these girls, had worn large holes in their trousers; and any sight more disgustingly indecent or revolting can scarcely be imagined than these girls at work—no brothel can beat it. (Parliament 20)

Explicit in this description is the sexual concern that pervaded the parliamentary reports regarding women in the mines. This comparison of the inside of the mine to a brothel is particularly alarmist and largely inaccurate—their dress and appearance was a response to their inhumane conditions. These parliamentary papers effectively resulted in the protection of women from the dangers of the mines following the publication of testimonials and disturbing images of the confined spaces and horrific working conditions in *The Westminster Review*. At this point, women participated in work both inside the mine and at the pit brow collecting coal, and the distinctions between these kinds of work in mining culture is significant. Work inside the mines was fraught with far more risk, given the unsafe conditions underground. Restricting women from working inside mines was a protective measure taken following the publication of this set of blue books, and as Nicola Verdon argues, "...Protective legislation, introduced from the 1830s, defined women as a group requiring social protection, further reinforcing the

belief that women's roles should be confined to the domestic sphere" (15). The protective legislation removing women from the mines was a "protective measure" that was equally a response to the sexuality of mining women. Many women were widely criticized due to their dress and appearance while mining and the blatant sexuality that was assumed as a result of mixing male and female workers in the mines. The perception of gender violations in the mines produced the outrage that eventually led to reform laws. While the parliamentary reports were documented by parliamentary commissioners, and are therefore modified and in some cases condensed, the representations of women in these reports clearly demonstrate significant contexts for, connections, and contrasts with *That Lass O'Lowrie's*.

One representation of testimony by Fanny Drake, age 15 from Overton, near Wakefield distinctly indicates the bodily injury that women endured when working in the mines:

I work at Charlesworth's wood pit. I hurry by myself; I have hurried to dip side for four or five months. I stop to rest at hole with the getter; and there is none else with us. I don't like it so well, it's cold, and there is no pan [fire] in the pit. I'd rather be out of pits altogether; I'd rather wait on my grandmother. I push with my head sometimes; it makes my head sore²³ sometimes, so that I cannot bear it touched; it is soft too. I have often had headaches and colds, and coughs, and sore throats. (Parliament 75)

²³ Later in this set of parliamentary papers, a surgeon was consulted and agreed that this injury was commonplace for those working in the mines, though there were discrepancies regarding how much it affected their bodily health. When asked directly if this injury arrives as the result of a deficiency of strength in the arms, Surgeon Alexander Muir, Esq. established that he believed this was the cause (Parliament 187). He was asked, "are there any particular diseases to which colliers are subject?" He responded, "No—excepting that the hurriers are occasionally affected by a formation of matter upon the forehead..." (Parliament 187).

This reference to the soreness and softness of her head was an injury unique to miners. At the end of this testimony, the ailments are clustered together, compounded: headaches, colds, coughs, sore throats, establishing the physical strain of illness she must endure while working. The female body while laboring must also field simultaneous ailments that break down the body with frequency. Additionally, the emphasis on hurrying alone establishes how she must strategize her movements throughout the day—she must decide when to rest when meeting the getter and continue her work afterward. Physically, she is not only confronted with the injury on her head but must also negotiate the challenges of having no access to fire and bearing the cold while performing her work. This testimony also clearly indicates the extent of mental and emotional labor required as well: “I’d rather be out of pits altogether; I’d rather wait on my grandmother” (Parliament 57). Implicit in this admission is the mental and emotional labor required to continue to endure work she does not want to do; although she would much rather be a caregiver for her grandmother, which readers would consider a more “natural” vocation for women, she continues to labor in the pits.

In contrast with this testimony, Joan is described as a strong, tall, picture of health at the beginning of the novel: “The others seemed somewhat stunted in growth; she was tall enough to be imposing” (Burnett 2). The only injury that Joan endures in the novel is bleeding from her temple following abuse from her father at the beginning of the novel. Joan’s position at the pit’s mouth protected her from the injuries common for women who worked in the mines. Although readers only see her at the pit’s brow for most of the

novel,²⁴ when she illegally enters the mine to rescue Derrick and others from an explosion that has just occurred in the mine, it is evident that she has had experience within the mining pit as well. She successfully navigates the space expertly and avoids potential danger as she performs the rescue mission. The reference to caring for her grandmother in the testimonial presents another connection to the novel, in that mining work was generational for women.

Although briefly noted in *That Lass O'Lowrie's*, Joan's mother was lost at a young age as the result of her work in the mines: "...her mother was a pit girl until she died—of hard work, privation and ill treatment" (Burnett 3). The requirements of her work and her circumstances of deprivation coupled with her husband's abuse eventually contributed to the end of her life, hearkening to the deprivation and hard work associated with the working class. It is evident that Burnett had widely researched the fates of mining women, which makes her insistence on creating a heroine in Joan that avoids an early death and motherhood all the more subversive. Joan subverts the expectations and principles put in place for working-class women particularly by her willingness to go into the mine to make a rescue at the end of the novel, despite the relegation of women only being expected to work at the brow of the mining pits.²⁵ Joan provides for herself and her

²⁴ Since the novel is ambiguous in terms of time period, it is unclear whether or not it takes place after the reforms took place to ban women from working inside the mines.

²⁵ According to the UK National Archives, "The Coal Mines Act was passed in 1842 as result of Lord Shaftesbury's report into the employment of women and young children in coal mines. The law stopped all females and children under 18 years of age from underground working. From 1843 the act was extended so that all women had to stop working underground. For many mining families the loss of income from these working women was a disaster. However, the Mines Act did not forbid girls and women working on the surface of the mine and they became to be known in Lancashire as Pit Brow Lasses. They worked at various jobs ranging from loading wagons to sorting coal" ("Victorian Lives"). Despite these changes, these rules were often ignored by owners of the mines and women continued to work in the mines in many locations.

household without working herself into an early grave, and does not neatly fall into a marriage, although she has a proposal at the end of the novel.

In another testimony from the *Children's Employment* parliamentary papers, Jane Peacock Watson, a forty-year old coal bearer, demonstrates the physical and emotional impact of women's work in the mines, particularly in relation to family responsibilities:

'I have wrought in the bowels of the earth 33 years, have been married 23 years, and had nine children, two dead born, thinks they were so from the oppressive work; a vast of women have dead children and false births, which are worse, as they are no able to work after the latter. I have always been obliged to work below till forced to go home to bear the bairn, and so have all the other women. We return as soon as able, never longer than 10 or 12 days; many less, if they are much needed. It is only horse-work, and ruins the women; it crushes their haunches, bends their ankles, and makes them old women at forty. Women so soon get weak that they are forced to take the little ones down to relieve them; even children of six years of age do much to relieve the burthen. Knows it is bad to keep bairns from school, but every little helps'. (Parliament 30)

In the representation of testimony from Jane Peacock Watson, bodily references to her work are immediately made when the text reveals that she had "wrought in the bowels of the earth" (Parliament 30). When examining the term "bowel," it refers not only to the inside of the body, but, obscurely, to the seat of emotion and offspring or children as well (*OED*).²⁶ The bowels of the earth function as the epicenter of illness, where the surroundings cause mutilation to women's bodies over time. In reference to the 'seat of emotion,' it is evident that emotional labor is being completed along with mental labor, caregiving, mothering, and physical work. These efforts all contribute to protective labor, and while she acknowledged that keeping children from school comes with negative

²⁶ "bowel, n.1." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, September 2016. Web. 05 October 2016.

consequences, each family member contributing to the work protects them from want. While work is being done in the bowels of the earth, women's work continues with pregnancy; however, despite the toll pregnancy takes on the body, women cannot protect their own bodies from harm, but rather must protect their children. The bodily work of childbirth in this instance is combined with the physical work in the mine: "I have always been obliged to work below till forced to go home to bear the bairn" (30). The implications of this necessity are the expectations for women to not only perform physical labor to support their families, but also to give birth, and the use of the term "forced" has associations with violence.²⁷ Not only in this representation of testimony, but in others as well, the physical work of birth is described as forceful. Following childbirth, these women are unable to enjoy the fruits of their physical labor, since their children were used to supplement the mother's labor in the mines: "Women so soon get weak that they are forced to take the little ones down to relieve them; even children of six years of age do much to relieve the burthen. Knows it is bad to keep bairns from school, but every little helps" (Parliament 30). Along with the strain of the physical work resulting in weakness, the mental and emotional labor strain is clear here as well—mingled with the relief of assistance is the guilt of depriving their children of an education. Children work as an extension of women's bodies to relieve the burden. Where they have become weak in body and mind, they supplement with their children, who are able to bear the burden of this work with more vigor since they have not yet endured years of strain. Children close the gap in the labor once women's bodies are

²⁷ "forced, adj." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, September 2016. Web. 05 October 2016.

broken down and provide a temporary solution to aging. However, this cycle perpetuates with the children as well, and their bodies are being broken down from the beginning of their lives, from the time when they are first viable to work. Therefore, the children working as extensions of women's bodies are subject to accelerated aging. This early exposure results in breakdown of the mind and body:

...the organs will not be developed, their functions will be enfeeble and disordered, and the whole system will sustain an injury which cannot be repaired at any subsequent stage of human life...childhood is no less essentially the period of the development of the mental faculties, on the culture and direction of which, at this tender age, the intellectual, moral, and religious qualities and habits of the future being almost wholly depend (Parliament 268).

Here, the language of an irreparable injury is used which occurs in the earliest part of life, and these children are stunted. While this section of text is located in the "Appendix: Instructions to the Sub-Commissioners" section, it sets the scene for findings in the testimonials. Perhaps the most significant reference in this description is that of the whole system sustaining an injury which cannot be repaired. This reference does much to reinforce the idea that labor is interconnected—when the body is taxed, the entire system is strained, including the emotional and mental elements of the body. In the case of the testimonials, women who have started this work as children and have continued into adulthood sustain systemic injury at a much earlier age yet continue to perform the work. This circumstance reveals the fluid nature of women's work—while released from one labor, they must labor to give birth, and upon return, they must have their children support work in the mines. Returning to work and continuation following childbirth quickly leads to physical debilitation, it "...ruins the women; it crushes their haunches,

bends their ankles, and makes them old women at forty” (30). Here, the human costs of the work come to light with the accelerated aging of these women. Work is endowed with the physical power to ruin, crush, and bend, clearly indicating force over women’s bodies to not only harm, but also negatively manipulate. The physical force of work is represented as breaking down the body and aging it. Additionally, work is described as having the ability to “make them old women at forty” (30). This reference to premature aging and “ruin[ing]” the women is a direct result of a lack of protective labor for themselves.

In direct contrast to this testimonial, the character of Joan Lowrie is child-free, but engages in protective labor for both her friend Liz and her baby girl. She neither works in the mines nor does she bear the physical injuries and ailments common with mining work. While Joan frequently brings the baby girl to work with her at the mines wearing her in a wrap, she never needs to use the baby as an extension of her own labor. She also makes it possible for Liz to never return to work following the birth of her child, allowing her body to recover. Joan does not bear any of the bodily injuries or premature aging that is conveyed in this testimonial; however, she is able to remove herself from Riggan at a young age and the nature of her work is entirely different than collecting coal at the mouth of the mine. In this new setting, she is responsible for assisting a prominent woman in town who coordinates events. Her social status has advanced, as has her job duties. Additionally, Joan is not deprived of education regardless of the requirements to provide for her household. Pursuit of her education was made possible by attending classes as she could led by Anice Barholm, daughter of the Rector, and Reverend Paul

Grace, curate of the parish. She independently studied as much as possible with the aid of materials given to her by Anice and through her own efforts. She was not bound to the decisions of her parents for her education but was able to pursue it on her own. The character Anice Barholm observes of Joan's educational pursuits: "She was absolutely amazed to find out how much she was learning, and how much she had learned, working on silently and by herself. She applied herself to her tasks with a determination which seemed at times almost feverish" (Burnett 85). While Joan is immediately set apart from her counterparts in the mining community, she has been doing this work all of her life as well. Significantly though, she has not endured any of the injuries or deformities that happen as a result of a lifetime of labor with mining. As a character, Joan appears to be equally invested in her work and her education, and this is a form of protective labor for herself as well—her educational pursuits outside of her work as a pit lass keep her continuously curious and learning. Joan is able to break the cycle of this abuse from work—she only works at the mouth of the pit and decides to leave Riggan for another life before her body breaks down. Part of her protective labor for herself is choosing to maintain a balance between work and her education, which serves as a precursor for the self-care movements commonly seen today. For Joan, education is a way out of the cycle of exploitation, early aging, and early death associated with the working class, particularly women, who are stretched between physical and domestic labor. Beyond satisfying her curiosity, education will provide her with the means to explore opportunities that would not have otherwise been available to her. One such opportunity was assisting Mrs. Galloway in Ashley-Wold to aid in fulfilling her duties and serve as

“...a companion who is young and strong, and quick to understand the wants of those who suffer” (Burnett 209). Mrs. Galloway notes that she has accumulated duties over the years since she has lived in Ashley-Wold her entire life, and Joan, with the help of her education, is capable of being her companion to assist in fulfilling these duties. This position establishes Joan as one who not only help others, but also “understand the wants of those who suffer” (Burnett 209). Ultimately, her acquisition of education places her in a position of authority to assist and possibly educate those who are suffering rather than take part in that suffering herself.

Unlike Joan, who was able to pursue education with more and more frequency throughout the novel, one testimony from sixteen-year-old Margaret Watson indicates the mental and physical work required on the rare occasion in which they were able to attend school: “I was first taken below to carry coals when I was six years old, and have never been away from the work, except a few evenings in the summer months, when some of us go to Carlops, two miles over the moor, to learn the reading” (Parliament 18). In this testimony, emphasis is put on work first and the act of learning last. Only a few evenings in the summer months are set aside for learning reading, which is in line with the earlier statement that these children have little opportunity to develop their mental faculties. These educational opportunities were pursued during the summer because the light of day lasts longer and therefore affords more opportunities to travel to class around a rigorous work schedule. It is also significant that more physical labor must occur to acquire education—they must travel two miles over the moor in order to attain it, and it only occurs in a space far from the mines. In contrast, Joan is able to attend school within a

short distance of her work and is eventually even able to contribute to teaching lessons. She is also provided with materials to continue to hone her skills, particularly in literacy, outside of the classroom, which is more aligned with the middle-class. While Joan takes steps to create a new life for herself in Ashley-Wold, her move is complicated by her acknowledgment that she can never separate herself fully from her working class life: “I coom away fro’ Riggan to be out o’ th’ way on it—not to forget it, for I conna—but so as I should na be so near to—to th’ hurt on it” (Burnett 209). Expressing her desire to be further from the hurt there, while she cannot forget the pain she has already endured, demonstrates the knowledge she has gained—in Ashley-Wold she will be able to relieve the suffering of others, no longer destined for a life of suffering herself. The protective labor performed in this instance by Joan is making her education a priority over her physical labor, in contrast to the mining women, who had no other alternative. Access to materials to further her literacy outside of the classroom, as well as making the time to do so clearly indicates the results of her protective labor for herself.

Ellspee Thomson’s testimony once again indicates the loss of protective labor for women and their children: “can say, to my own cost, that the bairns are much neglected when both parents work below; for neighbors, if they keep the children, they require as much as women sometimes earn, and neglect them. The oppression of the coal-bearing is such as to injure women in after-life; and few exist whose legs are not injured, or haunches, before they are thirty years of age” (29-30). This passage reveals the mental taxing of women as they work; in order to provide care for children as they work, they must work and give all they earn for childcare. However, the system is flawed given that

the expectation for childcare is never the reality—children are neglected by parents and caregivers, adding to the mental/emotional stress of women as they work. In this testimony, the work is described as “oppression” resulting in injury before the age of thirty (29-30). The position of “oppression” in the text places the work in a position of power over women—a force able to injure even beyond the years of viable work. Joan Lowrie provides a meaningful contrast to these circumstances with her protective labor for Liz and her child. She single-handedly ensures that the care for Liz’s child is not neglectful by taking on much of the care herself and by watching Liz to make sure that she does what she should for her child: “...a new influence began to work upon Liz’s protectress. The child for whom there seemed to be no place in the world, or in any pitying heart—the child for whom Liz felt nothing but vague dislike and resentment—the child laid its light but powerful hand upon Joan...for the child’s sake she made an effort to brighten the dullness, and soften the roughness of their surroundings” (Burnett 46). Through Joan’s efforts, Liz is not forced to try to find viable childcare that takes the majority of her income, but instead is gifted with exceptional care provided by Joan herself. This protective labor allows for Liz’s child to have the opportunity to grow and be nurtured rather than neglected. This act of protective labor preserved Liz’s daughter’s health as well, in contrast to the children mentioned in the parliamentary papers.

Mining children were frequently the products of their environment: “...the effect of employment in the coal mines in rendering the children weak in their limbs and crippled in their gait, so that anyone can distinguish a collier’s child from the children of other working people” (Parliament 186). These children are easily distinguished by

deformities in their gait and weakness in their limbs from those of other workers. These physical indicators are pronounced and observed by others. The fact that these children are distinguished from other children of workers in other professions references the implicit class divisions even within the working class (186). This weakness seems to be passed down from the parents to the children. Once again, children serve as an extension of women's bodies, assisting to relieve the burden of their labor, but at the consequence of their bodily health. Through Joan's protective labor of Liz's daughter, the baby girl was able to avoid any physical injuries or disabilities as a result of work at the pit's mouth.

Mining Women's Roles and Munby's Diaries

Part of what makes *That Lass O'Lowrie's* such a subversive text for 1877 is the position of a heroine at the center of a novel who participates in a vocation that was widely misunderstood and frequently condemned. This novel is subversive because it challenges the expectations for women in Victorian society—Joan is not written as weak, she is instead a protector for herself and others, she is not a mother despite her caring for Liz's child, and she works to change her social position for herself. In the Victorian age, women's relationship to work was continuously in a state of tension, and never more so than for what was considered to be this "men's work" of mining. Confusion regarding the different types of work for women in a mining community was largely the result of the *Children's Employment Commission of 1842*,²⁸ as Angela John asserts:

²⁸ At the end of this chapter, I will provide samples of testimonials from the 1842 Employment Commission and put them in conversation with what work women are seen performing in the text.

The tradition of women working in coal mines had a profound effect on attitudes toward their work at the surface or pit brow. Contemporaries simply confused the two, believing that anything under the label of women's work at mines must be similar to the situation described in the Children's Employment Commission of 1842. This perpetuated a false link between very different types of work. As late as the 1880s, respected journals such as the *Lancet*²⁹ could condemn this 'disgusting' work, making the basic mistake of assuming that women still worked *in* pits when in fact they had been prohibited by law from such work nearly fifty years earlier. (19)

This disconnect between the dates of the employment commission publication and the later mention in the 1880s in *The Lancet* is telling—this association with disgusting work followed mining women despite their work being limited to only the mouth of the mine decades beforehand. The association with disgusting work makes it all the more significant that Joan was able to not only use her knowledge of the internal workings of the mine for the laudable use of the rescue, but also to secure a different profession following her move. Against the backdrop of the debate for women's right to work³⁰, Burnett crafted a character who participated in her work without any shame, who was willing to venture into the mines to perform a rescue mission, clearly familiar with the layout and risks. There was a concentrated effort to remove women from mines entirely following the children's employment parliamentary papers, and the work of a pit brow lass was often confused with that of mining women who endured backbreaking labor in the mines. While Joan eventually leaves her town of Riggan and her mining work, it was her choice and not the influence of others that furthered this plan, and she was never fully

²⁹ The *Lancet* is a long-respected general medical journal that had its start in 1823.

³⁰ This movement was, of course, for a middle-class woman's right to work, as working-class women were already employed.

assimilated into her new environment. With her novel, Burnett captured not only the dangers of mining work—there is a mining explosion that occurs near the end of the novel that could have been easily prevented—but also the important placement of women in these communities over generations. This reference to a trade supported by generations of women is supported by John’s claim that, “women had worked in coal mines for centuries, wives and daughters playing a vital role in the family economy...several cases are documented of women working in coal mines in the sixteenth century...women were working at Winlaton colliery in the north-east as early as 1587” (20). Despite their longevity of service in the mining industry, when investigations of the mines occurred, women’s testimonials were not given a separate thorough inquiry, but were instead included in the Children’s Employment reports. Burnett’s choice to employ Joan as her main character for a text focused on mining is exceptional not only because it emphasizes women’s work in the mining community—in Joan’s case, collecting coal at the mouth of the mine—but also presents a woman who is not bound to traditional domestic roles of being a wife and mother.

Presenting a strong woman as the main character of the novel employs the cultural context of working women as a focus of the Victorian reading public, and as Leonore Davidoff establishes, a form of voyeurism (101). Davidoff cites the lives and work of George Gissing, Somerset Maugham, and Gladstone, as well as the research of Henry Mayhew and journalistic endeavors including the *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society* as evidence for the long-held fascination with Victorian working women (101). Perhaps the most engaging of these powerful men obsessed with women’s work was A.J.

Munby, who orchestrated encounters with working women, including mining women, for his personal diaries and later, creation of postcards.³¹ He held a fascination for photographing working women and later modifying his work for postcards. Munby's work demonstrates the persuasiveness of the double bind of the gaze; while it objectifies women, it also raises reader awareness, which eventually led to legislation reform. Davidoff outlines his fascination with women performing work outdoors and in primarily masculine garb:

...Munby was collecting examples of women at work...[and] unlike Mayhew and Booth, Munby's observations were not commissioned by any official body nor were they intended to answer public questions or even written for publication...Munby sought out...above all, the "pit brow lasses" who worked in the coalfields sifting cinders and hauling carts at the pit surface. They not only worked outside in a primarily man's world but they were covered in coal dust and at least in Wigan, wore trousers. (101-103)

This sense of fascination and voyeurism with working women perfectly positioned *That Lass O'Lowrie's* to be a success, both in terms of wide readership and critical attention. While not intended to answer public questions, the novel nevertheless tapped into a critical vein of Victorian obsession. Through Joan Lowrie, Burnett crafted a character that was not confined to the gender expectations of a delicate appearance. Her clothing was practical and functional for her work collecting coal at the pit's brow, but she wore it with style: "...She wore her uncouth garb differently. The man's jacket of fustian, open at the neck, bared a handsome sunbrowned throat. The man's hat shaded a face with dark

³¹ Sarah Edge argues that Munby was not the only prominent man engaged in these activities, however: "urban tourism...involved travel into working-class areas of the city or tourism to 'industrial' rural sites like mining, were primarily restricted to bourgeois men" (44).

eyes that had a sort of animal beauty, and a well-molded chin” (Burnett 2). It was exactly this contradiction of appearance and gender that made Joan such an icon in the mining community of Riggan, and along with this fluidity comes the power to protect others who are in danger in her community.

Protective Labor for Liz: Confronting Judgement and Providing a Home

The new image of the Victorian working-class woman was first established by Joan’s protective labor for Liz, a woman who had left the mine in pursuit of romance with one of the masters from the pit. Instead of living a life of delicate womanhood far away from her disenchanted life in the mining town of Riggan, Joan stayed in her community while Liz strayed. Readers first witness Liz as the victim of chiding by a group of mining women:

...It was not a disturbance with which it was easy for an outsider to interfere. A knot of women drawn away from their work by some prevailing excitement, were gathered together around a girl—a pretty but pale and haggard creature, with a helpless, despairing face—who stood at bay in the midst of them, clasping a child to her bosom—a target for all eyes. It was a wretched sight, and told its own story. (Burnett 17-18)

This initial reference to outsiders being virtually unable to interfere establishes Joan’s unique position in the novel—she is both an accepted part of this group since she is able to interfere, she has the power to persuade others like her; she is in a position of authority among her peers. This knot of women described in this scene creates the complex image of women united in the common interest of rejecting and insulting Liz. The first reference to Liz’s weakness as a character is also present in this passage. She is described as a

“pretty but pale and haggard creature, with a helpless, despairing face” (Burnett 18).

From first mention of Liz, she is pale and haggard, marked appearances of being unwell.

This presentation of her face as helpless and despairing is telling as well; she is unable to protect herself and overcome her evident anguish. This first glimpse of Liz sets the stage

for her instability and weakness throughout the text. She seeks out Joan as a protector she can rely on to deliver her from her own instability and who will accept her, unlike her

other peers: “‘Let me a-be:’ she cried, sobbing. ‘There’s none of yo’ need to talk. Let me a-be! I didna coom³² back to ax nowt fro’ none on you! Eh Joan! Joan Lowrie?’” (Burnett

18) As is all too common in Victorian narratives,³³ a woman who has had a child outside of marriage endures chastisement and humiliation, but instead of joining in with the

crowd, Joan disbands the public humiliation by appealing to the better nature of the

women. She uses Liz’s child to appeal to their own sense of family and evoke

compassion that they are unable to produce for Liz. Holding the child high for all to see,

she is described this way: “She bent down and took it from her, and then stood up before

them all, holding it high in her strong arms—so superb, so statuesque, and yet so

womanly a figure...” (Burnett 18). Already Joan is physically positioned as a protector

here, standing above her, and she embodies strength and dignity. In order to protect Liz,

she strategizes that producing compassion for Liz’s child could be extended to her as

well:

³² Burnett was very skilled at capturing the mining dialect.

³³ Both Esther in *Mary Barton* and the main character of *The City Girl* are isolated as the result of giving birth outside of marriage. Marriage looks different across regions and classes, as we have seen with relationships in *The City Girl*, and legal marriage was not always the custom in working-class communities. Unfortunately, Liz’s daughter dies near the end of this novel, in fitting with the trope of children dying once conceived out of wedlock for working-class characters.

“Lasses,” she cried, her voice fairly ringing, “do yo’ see this? A bit o’ a helpless thing as canna answer back yo’re jeers. Aye! Look at it well, aw’ on yo’. Some on yo’s gotten th’ loike at whoam. An’ when yo’ve looked at th’ choild, look at th’ mother! Seventeen year owd, Liz is, an’ th’ world’s gone wrong wi’ her. I wunnot say as th’ world’s gone ower reet wi’ ony on us; but them on us as has had th’ strength to howd up agen it, need na set our foot on them as has gone down. Happen their’s na so much to choose betwixt us after aw. But I’ve gotten this to tell yo’—them as owt to say o’ Liz, mun say it to Joan Lowrie. (Burnett 19)

In this moment, Joan radically sets herself apart from her peers by first gaining their sympathy for an innocent baby and then making them consider Liz’s position as well, not so far removed from childhood. She protects Liz through her creation of empathy—she asks them to think of their own children at home when they are jeering at the child and Liz. Instead of placing the blame on Liz, she leaves accountability with the world going wrong with her and ultimately failing her and her child. Instead of pushing Liz down further with insults and isolation, Joan not only defends her, but reminds these women that strength is a benefit they have had naturally, and not one they should abuse by using it to their advantage to put themselves in power over her. Through this labor of protection for Liz, Joan positions herself as defiant of more traditional gender roles—she is not afraid to stand up for her friend, to provide a place to live for her with her own money and resources, and to be accountable for her. She asked no man for permission, nor did she hesitate to associate herself with a woman who was being isolated for her perceived wrongdoing.

This scene initially creates the contrast between Joan as strong and protective and Liz as weak and inconsistent, a narrative that is emphasized as the novel progresses, but it establishes Joan in a non-traditional gender role as well. While both Joan and Liz are

referred to as “creatures” throughout the novel, a deliberate connection to the description of working-class women as half savages at the beginning, Joan is presented as a creature of a different sort. This is one of the first indicators of Joan’s lack of reliance on men for her livelihood, and her ability to provide for Liz and her child³⁴ with her own independent funds. Instead of living in a household where income is shared, Joan is the sole provider for herself, Liz, and her child. While her father also works in the mines, his character more consistently fulfills the stereotype of working-class men in Victorian literature—he is an alcoholic who spends the majority of his money on his habit, leaving provision for basic necessities to Joan. Gesturing toward the harsh realities of working-class life, Joan’s character demonstrates a willingness to protect her father from any consequences for the abuse she endures at his hand. The principle of family loyalty was a factor in this decision, which was a prominent concern for the working-class. Provision for the family required all parts of the family to contribute, regardless of abuse. Even across classes, domestic abuse was often met with family loyalty. When Derrick finds her on the Knoll road bleeding from her temple, she declined the opportunity to identify her father as her abuser. Instead of having an emotional reaction to her abuse, she remains stoic and unwilling to expose her father or entirely leave her situation. This lack of ability to protect herself at the beginning of the novel makes her transition at the end of the novel that much more remarkable—she no longer feels obligated to endure his abuse or remain in Riggan following his death.

³⁴ Throughout this chapter, I will refer to the child as “Liz’s child,” as she is only called “the child” and “it” in the novel.

Protector of Derrick Fergus

In addition to her efforts for her father, Liz and her child, Joan goes to great lengths to provide protection for Derrick Fergus as well, once again challenging gender roles. Derrick is an Engineer for the mines who was taken by Joan following his first witness of her courage standing up for Liz, however, after reprimanding her father, his life is in danger. One of the most significant ways Joan breaks away from traditional gender roles is her insistence on protecting Derrick each night on his way home by following closely at a few paces behind:

On one or two occasions he became conscious that he had a companion who seemed to act as his escort. It was usually upon dark or unpleasant nights that he observed this, and the first time he caught sight of the figure which always walked on the opposite side of the road, either some distance before or behind him, he puts his hand to his belt, not perceiving for some moments that it was not a man but a woman...he knew that Joan's desire to protect him had brought her there. (Burnett 71)

Joan's protective labor is emphasized in this passage; not only does she always keep a distance between them, but she made it a point to walk on the opposite side of the road to be aware of any potential dangers. She challenges gender roles in this scene through her willingness to be out on the road on the most dark and unpleasant nights, rather than home by the hearth. She is not accompanied by any companion or protector herself, but instead seeks out Derrick to keep him from harm. Additionally, the confusion Derrick has regarding whether or not she is a man or a woman is telling—these lines are continuously blurred for Joan. She is not a weak woman requiring Derrick's protection from her

abusive father, but rather the person most equipped to ensure his safety. Staying one step ahead of her father's plan of attack requires careful planning and resilience.

Instead of remaining in the home, for much of the novel readers see Joan traveling the Knoll Road in pursuit of her own guiding principles—providing protection for Derrick and pursuing education for herself as well. The Knoll Road is a precarious space where workers travel by night and where plots are planned and carried out for violence, as seen at the end of the novel when Derrick is attacked. When not traveling the Knoll road, she is at the mouth of the mine working, or caring for Liz's daughter, who she brings with her on her daily work and errands. It is significant that Joan's choice to provide protection for Derrick is one that puts her life in danger; and her protection of him in the novel is physical at first, then emotional at the end of the novel. She leaves Riggan with the full intent to leave her old life behind her, and with it the prospect of a relationship with Derrick.

Although Joan leaves Riggan with the intent to create a new life for herself, Derrick's need of protection by Joan eventually leads to his impulse to propose marriage at the end of the novel. Following the death of her father and with it the most immediate threat to Derrick, Joan protected him from death by rescuing him from the mine and helping to care for him during his illness following the rescue. When Joan decides to leave Riggan, Derrick is no longer at risk for death, but is still not well. Her protective labor for herself continues here, as she tells Anice Barholm her reasons for leaving and her plans for a new life: "I mun break loose. I want to get as far fro' th' owd life as I con. I'd loike to forget th' most on it. I'm goin' to-neet, because I dunnot want to be axed

questions. If I passed thro' th' town by day-leet, theer's them as ud fret me wi' their talk" (Burnett 201). She strategically avoids those who may try to deter her from leaving by starting her journey at night, and most importantly, she avoids confrontation with Derrick and leaves before he is awake. Derrick's response when he wakes and speaks with Reverend Grace is that he needs her to completely recover, supporting the idea that his impulse to propose was the result of his need for protection: "Yes—yes—Grace, I cannot wait—I must hear something. A hundred things might happen. I must at least be sure she is not far away. I shall never regain strength as long as I have not the rest that knowledge will bring me..." (Burnett 202). In the passage, the need for Joan's protection is emphasized, and his physical health and regaining of strength is reliant on her. The knowledge he refers to is ambiguous here, but the part of the conversation right before and after it implies that he wants to propose marriage. Significantly though, there is no mention of Derrick's love or attachment to her or plans for the future, he only focuses on Joan being close and her essential role in his regaining strength. At the end of the novel he does declare his love for her, but only after he acknowledges that she saved him and would be better off dead if she was unable to love him. Her response was not yet, and the implication is that their marriage could very well never come to fruition because what is required beforehand is her own betterment of herself, which she has made a continuous process.

Protective Labor for Herself

As a character, Joan practices growth from her position at the beginning of the novel to the ways in which she had matured by the end. While she was never a weak

character, the earliest depictions of Joan are slightly problematic in terms of her willingness to continue to endure the abuse of her father to provide for him. By the end of the novel, she has shed the threat of her father with his death and has chosen an environment for herself in which she is able to protect herself from the trappings of working herself to death in a mining town. At her request, she has made herself the companion of Mrs. Galloway to help her carry out the duties she must to protect those who are suffering.

At the close of the novel, Joan is not found in her cottage in Riggan but rather due South with Anice Barholm's grandmother. She had travelled a long way to reach her destination, and I interpret her last meeting with Derrick as a subversive one. The last chapter is titled "Not Yet," and it is no accident that this scene takes place in a garden, a place that she could previously only witness from the Knoll Road while Anice tended to her own garden. The garden is a space frequently associated with femininity and mother nature; it is presented in stark contrast with the mining town of Riggan, which is described as devoid of natural growth, except at the home of the Rector. According to Christen Ericsson-Penfold,

The Victorian English garden was strongly gendered. Just as the domestic environment was the idealized and culturally accepted space for women, so too was the domestic garden...whether in the suburbs or the outskirts of a small country village, because of their deliberate separation from the increasing sprawl of urban spaces, domestic gardens were seen as pieces of untainted countryside, distinct from the wild, unbridled landscape...The uncontested safety of acceptability encouraged women to engage with spaces such as the domestic garden and, in turn, provided an increased feeling of freedom within them. (118-119)

I assert that the garden readers find Joan in at the end of the novel is associated with separation from urban spaces, as well as a disconnect with the industrial systems that had isolated her before. The garden is undoubtedly a feminine space in terms of literary associations, however, the increased freedom Joan finds in this space is one that takes her away from more traditional gender obligations—here she is the companion of an older woman, not a wife and mother. It is a space she can adapt as she wishes, not one controlled by men in powerful positions, and its limits are determined by her. This garden is symbolic of the protective labor she has performed for herself—she has created a space that provides her with comfort and the blooms with her efforts; work that creates and sustains life and work of her choice. Her garden is her sanctuary from a painful life in Riggan, and another way in which she challenges the boundaries of class. This idea of the garden as sanctuary or spiritual space is supported by Sebag-Montefiore's claims that Burnett had a spiritual identification with nature that frequently came out in her literary work (69). She was able to move from living in a desolate cottage in a state of disrepair to living in a comfortable home with another woman as a companion, carrying out her work to provide assistance to Mrs. Galloway, thus moving up in terms of class. The garden has become a space of personal freedom rather than one associated with the confines of domestic life.

Although there is a love plot in the novel between Joan and Derrick, there is never a clear resolution for their situation. Sebag-Montefiore asserts that *That Lass O'Lowrie's* is "the powerful story of Joan Lowrie, the pit girl, who marries Derrick, the gentleman engineer" (71). This last scene in the novel does not end in a marriage, but rather a

declaration of love and the possibility of marriage in the future. The novel ends with a proposal from Derrick as they stand in the garden, but despite her declaration of returned love for him, she never formally accepts and the novel ends. Instead of a tidy marriage ending and the possibility of moving back to Riggan, she instead insists on her need for continual improvement:

“Not yet,” she said, “not yet. I conna turn you fro me, but theer’s summat I must ask. Give me th’ time to make myself worthy—give me th’ time to work an’ strive; be patient with me until th’ day comes when I can come to yo’ an know I need not shame yo’. They say I am na’ slow at learnin’—wait and see how I can work for th’ mon—for th’ mon I love.” (Burnett 213)

While she cites a desire to make herself better for the man she loves, she is ultimately choosing to continue her education before marriage, an act unheard of for women during the period, particularly those in the working class. Additionally, she challenges gender roles with this statement because it would establish her in a position of control in terms of when the relationship culminated into marriage, if it ever did. Insisting that she come to him when she is ready demonstrates the reversal of a more traditional gender role—she would be the pursuer if the time came for their marriage to come to fruition. While she gives credence to the idea of working for the man she loves, she does not say she needs time to make herself worthy of him, and I argue that in this statement, this dash/hesitation in her speech indicates her need to become worthy for herself, and to work and strive for herself first, before working for the man she loves. He is mentioned last in this statement that ends the novel. With this choice she challenges barriers of gender and class; pursuit of an education and self-betterment rather than marriage and, most likely, a family was

not a common choice for women during the period. Ultimately, she is resisting the dissolution of self that is expected of women in marriage and in domestic spaces, which includes legal dissolution of self. By arguing that she must make herself worthy of his position so he will not endure shame, she is able to avoid an immediate commitment that would force her to divide her attention. She is associated with evergreen several times in this last scene, and according to Beverly Seaton's definitive study on the Victorian language of flowers, evergreen is associated with artifice (174). I argue that in this scene, Joan is engaging artifice—she professes love for Derrick, but also the need to continue her education and cultural refinement to be worthy of him. She was engaged in pursuit of her education before meeting Derrick for her own edification beforehand, however, and this is one way she can avoid marriage. This is another way in which her character is resistant to traditional gender roles—she does not immediately agree to a marriage based on the proposal of a man whose class is considered above hers.

Conclusion: Far Removed from the Drawing Room

The working communities of mines were self-contained and largely underexamined until The Children's Employment Commission temporarily exposed this world and, as John contends, "[revealed a community] in which females worked indistinguishably from males...they were employed in what was traditionally the most masculine of domains, as far removed from the Victorian drawing room as could be imagined" (28). While it may appear that the character of Joan Lowrie is moving from the mine to the drawing room by her actions, and thereby relinquishing some of her autonomy, I argue that she is creating a space for herself that has more independence than

she had before. I assert that she uses/re-frames indistinguishability for her own aims, and to create agency instead of objectification. Following her protective labor first of Liz and then Derrick, she decided then to protect herself. Examining the ways in which she engages protective labor to break gender and class expectations leaves readers with the new image of the Victorian pit brow lass as capable, strong, and resilient. While Joan is physically removed from her working-class community at the end of the novel, the connections to her work remain. Instead of fulfilling the gender and class expectations to enter a marriage and provide a space for men and a possible family to find nurturing, instead she nurtures herself and continues her education. This new image of the working-class pit brow lass in the novel brought women from isolated mining communities to the forefront of reader attention for reasons other than assumed sexual promiscuity and associations with savagery. In Joan, readers were exposed to a pit brow lass who was not in any way promiscuous, but rather civilized and moral before leaving her working-class community. Social mobility is possible for working-class women, as evidenced by Joan's position at the end of the novel. A self-made woman who provided for herself through her own financial means and protected others through her personal efforts, Joan demonstrated an alternative way of life for pit brow lasses. Throughout the novel, Joan is reliant on other women and herself for successes, which establishes a position of autonomy. Having a woman represented in this way does much to inform readers of accurate mining work positions and roles of women in these positions. More broadly, Jane represents a person capable of changing her circumstances and resisting expectations placed upon her. John's argument that women's work was indistinguishable

from that of men in the mines is certainly supported by the character of Joan Lowrie, however, she is written as far more capable and self-reliant than her male counterparts. Alice Wilson, who I focus on in my next chapter, is capable and self-reliant as well in terms of the labor she chooses—healing labor. Like Alice, Joan challenges gender expectations with her ability to protect and achieve her own desires, a possibility that was not often within the reach of working-class women during the period. Her labor is especially important given the blatant misconceptions of mining women. Ultimately, this new image of working-class mining women breaks from the ideas of mining women as half-savage and incapable and instead presents the possibility that outlying mining communities were filled with women whose narratives, class statuses, and gender roles were far more complex than previously assumed.

CHAPTER III

‘BESIDE THE FEVERED SLEEP OF ONE THEY LOVE’: WORKING-CLASS WOMEN’S HEALING LABOR, ROUGH AND READY NURSES, AND DISCORDANT MALE MEDICAL PRACTICE IN *MARY BARTON*

...I bethought me how deep might be the romance of the lives of some of those who elbowed me daily in the busy streets of the town in which I resided. I had always felt a deep sympathy with the care worn men, who looked as if doomed to struggle through their lives in strange alternations between work and want; tossed to and fro by circumstances, apparently in even a greater degree than other men. (Gaskell 3).

In her October 1848 “Preface” to *Mary Barton*, Elizabeth Gaskell enlightens the reader regarding her purpose and inspiration for her first novel; to sympathetically share the stories of those she encountered in order to bring awareness to their plight with the ultimate hope of unity between masters and men. Widely considered a condition of England novel, *Mary Barton* persuasively addresses the political and social issues of the period. Set in Manchester, the heart of Chartist activity, hostility between the classes, the formation of trades unions, and the rapid growth of industry, Gaskell captured the enormous tension of this time. In my previous chapter, I analyzed women participating in protective labor; in this chapter I move to focusing on women who perform healing labor to already damaged bodies. While class concerns are some of the most commented upon by critics, Robin Colby argues that Gaskell has an ‘axe to grind’ beyond these, which is

focused on the problems of nineteenth-century women (33). I agree that her novel focuses on the problems of women in the period. Further, I assert that the novel situates women in positions of power, particularly in those forms of labor they choose rather than those that are required of them as contributions to industry. By “power” I mean “capacity to direct or influence the behavior of others; personal or social influence,” especially in relation to reputation and authority on medical issues (*Power*, n., c). For example, Alice, rural healer and medical woman, directly influences the behavior and actions of others that seek out her guidance as an expert on medical issues and healing. She directs others in her community to take concoctions and teas that she makes and guides them through caregiving during an illness. My analysis uncovers a previously under-studied facet of women’s labor in *Mary Barton*. For the purposes of this chapter, I explore the complicated position of women healers in the novel, including Alice, Mrs. Sturgis, and Mrs. Davenport, as well as the working-class men that serve as their parallels, such as George Wilson, John Barton, and Job Legh, who complicate ideas of working-class masculinity through their depiction as tender nurses. In addition to these considerations, I examine the position of professional general practitioners in the novel and their relationship to the working class in terms of providing medical care, versus the working-class women’s healing labor. According to middle-class ideologies regarding the working class, working-class women engaged in any form of paid work were considered anonymous, unruly, disconnected from the home, and sometimes violent. Additionally, it was assumed by society that working women were more exposed to possible moral and physical dangers due to work, such as abandonment of the family and promiscuity.

Through Gaskell's careful efforts to emphasize the humanity shared by the working classes in the novel, she provides a critique of those who upheld the Victorian class system. Despite the disenfranchisement of their class, healing labor performed by the working-class women in the novel places them in positions of power with influence over others in a healing community of their own making rather than one that is only sometimes available to them, as was the case with professional medical practitioners. What I call "healing labor" in this chapter is any deliberate action a character takes to heal or attempt to heal another character physically or emotionally. I argue that working class women, and to a lesser extent, working class men, participate in healing labor, effectively disproving these middle-class ideologies associating the working-class with unruliness, violence, and danger.

The ideology of the Victorian middle-class established that the ideal state for women was to engage in domestic pursuits of idleness or sacrificial servitude and that work was dangerous for women.³⁵ In 1980, Enid L. Duthie argues that although the working man's plight is at the center of *Mary Barton*, it "is the working woman's life that Elizabeth Gaskell studies in the greatest depth" (121). The original working title of the novel was *John Barton*, and indeed his plight propels much of the action in the text. Although John Barton's circumstances are dire, the working woman's life is explored through several working-class women characters in the text, including Mary and Esther. Colby later draws attention to the ways in which Gaskell refutes reservations about

³⁵Colby maintains that "In this novel, Gaskell is responding to domestic ideology, which forbids activity and recommends decorous passivity or selfless servitude for women" (36).

women working by avoiding presenting them as victimized, but instead as demonstrative of female autonomy and self-reliance (38-39).³⁶ Readers see Mary Barton and later Ruth at their work sits as seamstresses, unlike the industrial fiction in which readers never enter the factories or mills. Wanda Neff establishes the “problem” of working-class women during the period with her argument that “Women as workers did not harmonize with the philosophy of the Victorians, and their deification of the home. Women ought to marry. There ought to be husbands for them. Women were potential mothers” (14). Working-class women were expected to be mothers and domestically inclined but were frequently criticized for their lack of formal marriages in some cases as well as the state of their homes. Patricia Johnson asserts that the gendered pressures on working class women put them in a state of perpetual conflict with expectations of their class, given that the term “working-class” was predominantly associated with men and the pressures on women to fulfill unrealistic domestic expectations (6). Jill L. Matus contends that “an array of scientific and medical authority is cited to show that the moral condition of the working classes, dependent on (and reflected in) the state and morals of the women, is perilously degenerate” (58). These middle-class ideologies were damaging to women in the working class given their problematic position. Ultimately though, representations of working-class women actively performing physical healing labor outside of their dominant occupations demonstrates a social critique of the middle-class ideology of work

³⁶ While her focus is not on medical women or healing labor, Colby establishes the significance of working-class women in the novel: “Mary Barton, a seemingly simple factory girl, represents, despite her disarming looks, a powerful force, for she bears the ideological weight of her class, women who work and who become strong in their labor. In this novel, Mary is a persuasive argument for female vocation” (44-45). While Mart presents a strong argument for female vocation, Alice is a persuasive argument for women who choose labor outside of their livelihood—it is what motivates her and drives her throughout the novel.

leading women astray. The healing labor performed by working class characters Alice and Mrs. Sturgis, and to a lesser extent, George Wilson, John Barton, and Job Legh in *Mary Barton* establish them in positions of power, or influence, in terms of accessibility, effectiveness, and care for the working class.

Implicit in the position of working women as physical healers are the gendered social expectations that women will perform this work in a chaste and delicate fashion.³⁷ The position of women as healers or medically knowledgeable has long been a gendered debate that complicates their position in the transition from the ‘old nurse’ to ‘new nurse’ figures. Scholars such as Alison Bashford, Megan Milota, Robin B. Colby, and Miriam Bailin have shaped the critical discourse of women in medical positions in Victorian fiction by establishing these gendered pressures of chasteness, class, and morality along with the growing desire to become distinguished from their male counterparts in regard to their scientific work and professional positions. Alison Bashford in particular charts this move from the old nurse to the new nurse as the result of the modernization of medicine: “The ‘old nurse’ was represented as a large, elderly, disordered working-class woman who worked without scruples regarding money-making, and without ethics or morality. The ‘new nurse’ was defined against this image, as young, middle-class, single (chaste), moral and pure...They stood for a process of modernization in the domain of health” (21). Despite this modernization of medicine, the narrative tradition of the alternative working-class woman healer remains.

³⁷ Florence Nightingale is an ideal example of these chaste and delicate expectations. Nurses in public were often sex workers versus the healing done within the home not long after the period of publication of the novel. This stereotype fades as nursing is professionalized and it becomes acceptable for middle-class women to become professional nurses.

In her article on women's progress or decline, Pearl L. Brown cites the rootedness in the community of women as a distinguishing factor in the lives of women in the novel and specifically claims that Alice Wilson demonstrates the uprootedness of the of the working class following the migration of workers: "Uprootedness in the working class is represented in the character of Alice Wilson whose past mirrors the dislocation caused by the migration of rural workers to urban centers in search of better economic opportunities" (352). While Alice is uprooted from her original post as a nurse for a family when they move, and then once more when she decides to live with her sister following the loss of her children, it is precisely her community that provides her with broader economic opportunities, but also with the chance to pass on her knowledge: "Alice Wilson passes on her knowledge of herbs and serves as a good role model..." (352). This act of sharing her knowledge ensures that it is carried on by women in her community. I assert that this community of working-class women healers builds a foundation for a legitimate alternative medical practice. Brown rightly maintains that, while *Mary Barton* seemingly focused on the male world of politics and economics and the conflicts between "Masters and Men," it is actually primarily concerned with women across social classes and generations as well as female maturation in an urban setting (Brown 347). I assert that the focus on women across social classes and generations as well as female maturation is weighted more in the novel than the economic and political conflicts between "Masters and Men." As my analysis shows, this connection between working women and this sense of female community and connection are contributing factors to the success of several female characters that perform healing labor in the novel.

Of the two novels Brown addresses, she establishes that *Mary Barton* is certainly the more progressive one in terms of women's roles, and this community of women is part of the fabric of the text. The women in this text can function with more autonomy and power due to their reliance on their shared knowledge and community of support. Those who are the most knowledgeable, such as Alice, influence the community in methods of healing socially and personally. If *Mary Barton* is a novel that addresses the conflicts between masters and men in hopes of more unity, it is also one that creates an empowered position for women to perform healing labor, ultimately changing the social narrative of working-class women.

Gaskell's *Mary Barton* takes place in industrial Manchester, where two working class families, the Barton's and the Wilson's, struggle to provide for their families and themselves. The Barton family is riddled with grief early in the novel, following the death of the matriarch of the Barton family, resulting in a terminated pregnancy as well. Her death was the perceived result of her sister Esther's leaving the family and the subsequent stress she endured; Esther would later become a sex worker. John Barton is left with the responsibility of supporting his daughter Mary and becomes increasingly critical of the distribution of wealth in England and the disconnect between the rich and poor in society. He joins the Chartist, trade-union movement while his daughter Mary labors as a dressmaker, eventually supporting their small family more than her father can. Falling prey to the temptations of opium to quell hunger and alleviate the weight of depression, John becomes increasingly unstable while Mary is romantically pursued by Harry Carson, a middle-class mill owner's son, and Jem Wilson, from the working-class family

she befriended as a child. Following a long absence, Esther returns to encourage John Barton to protect his daughter from ending up in the streets as she had. In a fit of rage, John then murders Harry Carson, the wealthy mill owner's son who had been aggressively pursuing Mary. Esther witnessed the murder and assisted Mary in freeing Jem Wilson from the consequences of a trial, as he was wrongly accused of the murder of Harry Carson. Unfortunately, Esther and John Barton die soon after Jem's name is cleared. Following the trial, Jem Wilson and Mary are wed and eventually have a child, living happily in Canada, where they were able to escape the negative consequences of being associated with the murder trial.

Representations of working-class women in Victorian fiction have often been distinguished by participation in their required work; however, in the case of Alice Wilson in *Mary Barton*, it is the work she actively chooses that defines her. Coral Lansbury contributed to the earlier critical conversation regarding Alice's work by arguing that her goal to return to the Burton farm was how she found meaning in life; however, I contend that Alice's chosen work of healing labor is what drives her (34). When readers are first introduced to Alice it is quickly established that she is a washerwoman by trade but is known in her community as a healer and expert in herbal medicine who has a willingness to come to the aid of any ailing person. Amy King and Megan Milota have both written on the medical position of Alice Wilson, but briefly, and in terms of political associations with herbal medicine and other medical practitioners in Gaskell's novels. I examine Alice as occupying a position of power in her community as a social critique of middle-class ideology and in contrast to professional male doctors in

the text. Alice's power demonstrates her direct influence on others socially and personally, and those who seek her help follow her advice. For example, in Chapter 1 of the novel, George Wilson recommends Alice's services for John Barton's wife Mary and particularly emphasizes her dedication despite a hard day's labor with washing: "I will say there's none more ready to help with heart or hand than she is. Though she may have done a hard day's wash, there's not a child ill within the street, but Alice offers to go to sit up, and does sit up too, though may be she's to be at her work at six the next morning" (Gaskell 12). This description by her brother George exposes the delicate balance she must create to support her labor in both veins, and it also indicates the shift from disenfranchisement to power from one labor to another. Her capacity to influence others personally and socially is demonstrated by the high demand that occurs for her services outside of her work as a washerwoman. She must strike a delicate balance through her decisions to complete her labor as a washerwoman since this income is what provides her with sustenance and a place to live, but this vocation is ultimately used as a means to an end—without her work as a washerwoman, she could not participate in the healing labor that she chooses for herself. A hard day's wash always awaits her, and her day begins very early; this work is required to sustain her. As a washerwoman she is unknown, but as she performs healing labor in her community, she has power. Her position of power stems from the trust placed in her and her ability to decide which method of healing is best, as well as the freedom to discover new means of healing. This power directly influences others and gives her personal and social influence in her community as an authority on healing. As a healer Alice is not expendable; she is in high demand to

resolve the needs of all those who are sick, and she actively chooses to heal children in the streets. She possesses specialized knowledge that is a valuable asset to her community that secures her position among those she heals as someone they trust with their health. Working-class women during this period were not only viewed as expendable, but also without power in terms of deciding their own fate beyond maternal and domestic pursuits. In fiction, working class women were largely portrayed as either victims³⁸ or morally deficient; however, Gaskell's text provides a new alternative for women in the working class—a position in the medical field in their communities long before women were officially allowed to practice.³⁹

The high demand for Alice in her community also serves as a critique of the lack of available medical treatments from professional doctors in any significant way for the working class during this period. The working class were at an extreme disadvantage in terms of medical care, as Megan Milota notes (6). However, Alice Wilson's services are a partial cure for this lack of access. Although Alice's long-term dream was to return to her family and childhood home to care for her mother, the need in her community for her healing labor never ceased enough for her to be able to go. Her dedication to healing is clear—she is willing to sacrifice sleep and her desire to reconnect with her family and

³⁸ Betty Higden in Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend* is a strong example of a working-class woman that is frequently victimized by her poverty, familial losses, and the rejection of society. Chapter three of this dissertation deals with Betty in more detail.

³⁹ Kristine Swenson illuminates the lack of access to the medical field for women: "As part of the reforms that followed the Crimean War, Parliament passed the Medical Act of 1858, which excluded women from professional registration as doctors as well as subjugating the nurse to the male physician" (63). Medical practice was still a relatively new movement in the nineteenth century with the professionalization of medicine during the same time as the publication of the novel. Along with this progress came a movement away from folk healing.

childhood home to continue her labor. Expertise, study, and intellectual labor are attached to her medical knowledge, and these aspects of her healing are discovered through other scenes in which she performs her work. Professional doctors were not nearly as accessible or as willing to sacrifice any part of their lives to be available to the working-class community.

Alice establishes herself in a position of power as a healer in her working-class community through her ever-growing knowledge of herbal medicine and methods of healing. Her capacity to direct behavior and personally and socially influences her community stems from her already wide knowledge of healing, but also her willingness to continuing growing that knowledge and trying new methods. Part of this opportunity for growth depends on her ability to travel into the natural outskirts of the bustling city of Manchester to find her materials. Her knowledge and expertise are evidenced by her active choices—she knows exactly where to go to gather these herbs in the fields and the medicinal purpose each one serves:

Alice Wilson had but just come in. She had been out all day in the fields, gathering wild herbs for drinks and medicine, for in addition to her invaluable qualities as a sick nurse and her worldly occupation as a washerwoman, she added a considerable knowledge of hedge and field simples;⁴⁰ and on fine days, when no more profitable occupation offered itself, she used to ramble off into the lanes and meadows as far as her legs could carry her (Gaskell 16).

⁴⁰ The OED defines “simple” as “a medicine or medicament composed or concocted of only one constituent, *esp.* of one herb or plant (obs.); hence, a plant or herb employed for medical purposes. Now *archaic*” (“simple, v6”).

In contrast to the male healers and medical professionals in the novel, which are few and seen mostly in professional medical roles, Alice goes to the fields for her remedies rather than relying on pharmacies or doctors in the city proper. Her herbal knowledge provides her with agency and community respect, which establishes her authority. When medicine from pharmacies or doctors is referenced in the novel, it is ineffective and frequently decided upon hastily and without much reason.⁴¹ Instead of relying on faulty draughts that were applied for a variety of purposes, Alice demonstrated power through her ability to collect and create her own healing broths and teas. This knowledge and willingness to continually explore to discover new means of healing allows her to provide care more efficiently; she never has to wait on a draught or pill to be sent for her, she delivers it herself and prepares it herself, ensuring the quality and effectiveness of her treatments. Alice seeks out the fields to locate the exact plants and herbs needed for specific illnesses for those in her community. The structure of the phrase “gathering herbs for drinks and medicine” implies that she must also take further steps to use these wild herbs to concoct a drink or medicine (Gaskell 16).⁴² These additional steps she must take emphasizes the expertise of her practice—she is able to start from scratch with raw materials and produce effective treatments. Amy King has notes that “Alice Wilson’s gatherings suggest an alternative medical practice, one whose exact relation to vernacularized medicine and natural history alike has remained beyond the reach of critical clarity” (257). While I agree that Alice’s gatherings certainly suggest an alternative medical practice, I assert

⁴¹ For example, when John Barton seeks a draught for the Davenports later in the novel, which is ineffective for the purpose of healing.

⁴² She operated in the wise woman and herbalist tradition as a carryover from the eighteenth century.

that her practice has authority that challenges the modern medical practices of the period. Alice certainly fulfills Victorian society's ideal expectations of a medical practitioner—she gathers her materials, answers the call of duty for every known illness, investigates alternative methods, discovers new concoctions; and along with her professionalism and extensive knowledge in botany, she is also well-versed in skillful conduct and bedside manner. Given these facets of her performance in the novel, she is more attentive and knowledgeable than the formally educated doctors in the text, as I demonstrate in the section of this chapter that contrasts medical men with healing women in the text. As King notes, despite her status as a poor and possibly illiterate healer, she is preserving a tradition of alternative methods of healing through her practice (259). In this passage, emphasis is also placed on the pleasure she takes in this chosen labor of gathering herbs through the use of the term “ramble” to describe her excursion.⁴³ She takes pleasure in this process of wandering the fields and meadows to gather herbs and receives no “payment” other than her own enjoyment and the wellness of those she will eventually heal. Part of what makes Alice so successful in her healing labor is precisely the pleasure she takes in doing it. Felicia Bonaparte argues that “The single women who work in Gaskell, although they are often forced to do so simply to support themselves, nonetheless take pleasure in working and...they do their work exceedingly well” (221). In the case of Alice, she chooses healing labor but is not forced to do so, which allows more pleasure than the work she participates in to sustain herself. With her healing labor

⁴³ According to the *OED*, “ramble” is defined as “an act of rambling; a walk or wander (formerly: any excursion or journey) without definite route or other aim than recreation or pleasure; (now) esp. in the country” (“ramble, n 1a”).

she is able to apply her specialized skills and knowledge to contribute to the greater community. In contrast, her work as a washerwoman is described as her “worldly occupation,” and is listed secondarily, after the reference to her “invaluable qualities as a sick nurse” (Gaskell 16). The structure of this passage indicates the primary focus of her labor, which is that of medicine and healing—it is what she chooses on days in which no more profitable occupation offers itself. While Alice strikes a delicate balance between various forms of labor throughout the novel, this emphasis on her healing labor indicates a greater commentary on the state of the working class. Through chosen labor, these women could have more power and a higher position in their communities. Her specialized knowledge of healing remedies gave her a position of status and power that was impossible to achieve in her work as a washerwoman. She was able to directly influence behavior of others and maintain social and personal influence through her recommendations to heal others or deal with the outcome of death. She was known for her expertise, sought out for treatment, and trusted as a healer. As a washerwoman she was anonymous and dismissed by those that employed her. Despite being dismissed by the upper classes, the working class had access to specialized care that general practitioners did not provide during this time period.

For the Victorian middle-class, the state of the home was always a marker of the precarious position of the working class, but for these marginalized women who perform healing labor, reflects their professionalism and efficiency in providing this specialized care. Jill Matus contends that “working-class domesticity....was *the* social problem that gave birth to Victorian social science, and as countless reports and theories on the moral

and physical condition of the working classes show, Victorians believed that the ‘condition of England’ was to be seen, accounted for, and modified in the home” (57). The home of the working-class woman healer, particularly in the case of Alice Wilson in *Mary Barton*, represents a different sort of medical care provided for the working classes; here is the center of operations for an alternative medical practice that is far more effective than the professional care offered to the community by medical professionals. Alice’s dwelling place in the cellar described at the beginning of the novel in chapter two indicates her full commitment to her labor as a healer and herbal medicine woman. She uses every article in her home for that purpose, and every available space to hang and dry her herbs: “This evening she had returned loaded with nettles,⁴⁴ and her first object was to light a candle and see to hang them up in bunches in every available place in her cellar room” (Gaskell 16). She had spent the entire day gathering the nettles, which were specifically used for medicinal purposes during this period. Her passion for this labor of healing is evident through the way that the herbs take up every available space. Gathering them in bunches to dry indicates the efficiency with which she prepares her drinks and medicines—she makes advanced preparations and gathers them to provide as much space as possible for her work. Megan Milota asserts that “Gaskell’s portrait of Alice and her herbal remedies reads more like a well-meant attempt to engage her reader’s sympathy for the working class;” however, I argue that this depiction of Alice’s bundling was a way to attach legitimacy to her medical practice for the working class. While bundling and

⁴⁴ Nettles have long been a medicinal herb, particularly in terms of pregnancy and breastfeeding. For more information, see Ravikumar’s study of herbal teas.

drying herbs was a widespread practice, particularly in rural areas, this effort to combine the herbs in advance of the need for them demonstrates her efficiency. Her preparation of remedies in advance challenged the other available means for medical treatment during the Victorian period—druggists who prescribed inadequate draughts and methods of healing and the physicians that ordered these same ineffective drugs to supplement their medical care.

In contrast, the effectiveness of Alice's healing labor is partially the result of the use of her home as a base for her work. There are very few items in her home, and each one contributes to her labor as a healer by sustaining her body and providing the means to make her healing broths, teas, and medicines. She has a modest bed, a curtain, a candle, tea pot, frying pan, and a cupboard with a tin saucepan, "which served as a kettle, as well as for cooking the delicate little messes of broth, which Alice was sometimes able to manufacture for a sick neighbor" (Gaskell 16). She is resourceful, and each item sustains her work as a healer. In the description of her home place, there is only one reference to her labor as a washerwoman: "The floor was bricked, and scrupulously clean, although so damp that it seemed as if the last washing would never dry up" (Gaskell 16). Her space is designated primarily for her healing labor rather than to support her washing work, but the dampness of her cellar home made it far more challenging for her herbs to dry. Her domestic space was also her labor space, reminiscent of the emotional labor done at home and primarily by women that was and continues to be a standard expectation. Jill Matus contextualizes the position of women in the 1840s in England as regulators of the

home tasked with improving working class conditions (57).⁴⁵ I argue that the homes of women who perform healing labor reinforce a commitment to resolving issues for the working classes, but not only through cleanliness. Cleanliness in this instance serves the medical function of providing a sterile area for medical work, but this choice also emphasizes her respectability since women were often judged by their domestic spaces. These homes reveal the respectability, accessibility, and commitment to healing the working-class that medical professionals treating this population did not possess.

In addition to the working-class woman healer's home being the center for professionalism and accessibility, it also indicates the divisions of class as well as assumptions of value for the working class. Alice's cellar home serves as a metaphorical response to the middle-class criticism of working women. Although appearances may be, to middle class readers, that working women who spend much of their time away from the home are bound to be led astray, the position of Alice's home indicates that there is much to be revealed under the surface for working women:

As the cellar window looked into the area⁴⁶ in the street, down which boys might throw stones, it was protected by an outside shutter, and was oddly festooned with all manner of hedge-row, ditch, and field plants, which we are accustomed to call valueless, but which have a powerful effect either for good or for evil, and are consequently much used among the poor. The room was strewed, hung, and darkened with these bunches, which emitted no very fragrant odour in their process of drying. (Gaskell 16)

⁴⁵ Jill Matus outlines women's responsibility in terms of domesticity: "Throughout the 1840s the public discourse of poverty and immorality focused on women's responsibility for the regulation of the home, the observation of sanitary laws and the inculcation of habits of thrift, providence, and temperance, which would ameliorate the conditions of the working classes" (57).

⁴⁶ This edition of the text indicates that an area is "an enclosed court, often sunken, giving access to the basement of a dwelling house" (Gaskell 417).

Hedges create a barrier or keep hidden what is desired to be hidden, and field plants is the commonly used term for those that can be used for medicinal purposes. These hedge rows, ditches, and field plants may seem valueless, but they are the ornaments and decorations to her home, as indicated by the use of “festooned.” Rather than a manicured appearance, this description is modified by “oddly,” which indicates the pervasiveness of her class; her home is not a position of power in terms of outside appearance, but with the constraints present for her, she uses the space to the best of her ability to achieve her aim. These field plants serve as a metaphor for Alice—she, like others in the working class, are seen as valueless, but she wields significant power for good by applying her knowledge to heal others. However, this description of the field plants also complicates ideas about the poor and working class more broadly with the reference that these plants “...have a powerful effect either for good or for evil, and are consequently much used among the poor” (Gaskell 16). Additionally, these plants can also be used for evil purposes, and the implication is that the poor often use them, but it is ambiguous in terms of how often or in what ways these plants could be used for evil. This complication is significant in terms of establishing that knowledge of how to use the plants is widely known, but the choice to use this power for good is only sometimes applied. For example, according to Elizabeth Campbell, nightshades native to Europe are “...plants of hedgerows and waste places, but are also powerful medicines and poisons, high in tropane alkaloids that affect the central nervous system to cause hallucinations, delirium,

coma, and sometimes death” (608).⁴⁷ Alice may appear to be a simple washerwoman, but to her community and even those within a long walking distance, she maintains a reputation for being the woman who can heal others physically through her teas, broths, medicines, and sage advice.

While middle class readers put their faith in the general practitioners available to them for medical care, they were made aware of working-class women healers through the representations in what they read, thus establishing a position of power and recognition for these unknown women in society. In Alice’s case, she was able to personally and socially influence her community in ways that medical doctors could not—her authority was trusted more. As Timothy Ziegenhagen observes, female herbalists were historically persecuted for assumed connections to witchcraft, which was considered a trespass against the patriarchal knowledge and authority of the university-educated, male physician (184).⁴⁸ According to Ziegenhagen, these women herbalists were irregular practitioners that worked in contrast to “the three main credentialed types of workers in England during the early part of the nineteenth century—physicians, surgeons, and apothecaries or druggists” and in addition, the quack (181). In a profession that was over-crowded by male practitioners where women were prevented from practicing in higher positions until the late nineteenth century, these representations of working-class women healers promote the long-time presence of women in alternative

⁴⁷ According to Campbell, in addition to nightshade, mandrake, henbane, along with aconite and hemlock all have documented dangerous properties (608).

⁴⁸ As Ziegenhagen asserts, women herbalists were known for their expertise and reputation for healing ills for poorer populations specifically. His article is focused on the Doctress of John Clare’s poem “The Village Doctress,” who shares many similarities to Alice, including her use of simples to heal ailments (181).

medical practice in every station. Alice's reputation, knowledge, and expertise as a healer establishes her in a position of power in her community, and deviates from the expectation that working-class women were immoral and uneducated. While there is no indication that Alice has been formally educated, it is evident that she is self-educated and carries on healing traditions she was taught. These methods extended to assisting with the process of death and healing those left behind to grieve. In chapter VII of the novel, she demonstrates her knowledge of the spirit clinging to life based on the desire of another with her conversation with a curious Mary Barton during the death of the Wilson twins:

‘We mun get him away from his mother. He cannot die while she’s wishing him.’
‘Wishing him?’ said Mary, in a tone of inquiry.
‘Ay; dunno’ ye know what ‘wishing’ means? There’s none can die in the arms of those who are wishing them sore to stay on earth. The soul o’ them as holds them won’t let the dying soul go free; so it has a hard struggle for the quiet of death. We mun get him away fra’ his mother, or he’ll have a hard death, poor lile fellow’ (Gaskell 74).

The healing that Alice is conducting in this scene is two-fold—for the remaining twin who was clinging to life she possesses the knowledge of what provides him with relief through being allowed to die. For Jane Wilson, she is guiding her to aid in that relief and begin her grieving process. Alice gently urges her, following a request and then a steady look, to give her remaining son to her, and Jane trusts Alice with him. While taking the dying child from his mother is problematic in terms of the grief of the parent to leave him, in this moment in the text Alice once again demonstrates her knowledge as a healer—she knows what is required for the boy to die and patiently waits until his mother

is ready to ease his suffering. Her gentle question and steadfast presence secured a bond with Jane that gave her the strength to let go, and Alice was given the honor of watching over her son as he took his last breath: “She bent down, and fondly, oh! With what passionate fondness, kissed her child, and then gave him up to Alice, who took him with tender care. Nature’s struggles were soon exhausted, and he breathed his little life away in peace” (Gaskell 75). Alice conducts herself with intentionality and continues the work of emotional healing by removing every physical sign of sickness, thus beginning to clear the space for Jane and the rest of the family to grieve: “...She fell into tidying the room, removing as much as she could every vestige of sickness; making up the fire, and setting on the kettle for a cup of tea for her sister-in-law, whose low moans and sobs were occasionally heard in the room below” (Gaskell 76). Her meticulous removal of all signs of sickness is a method of emotional and physical healing, which she is able to provide for Jane and George, despite the death of the twins. This removal was also part of her healing labor to prevent further illness, clearly indicating her knowledge of the possible risks to the family. She laid out their bodies with care and compassion to relieve the burden from their parents. Their physical illness was too advanced for her to heal them, but her first line of duty is to remove the memory of the sickness, build up the fire to provide a comforting warmth, and of course, brew her specialized tea for Jane. Throughout this scene, Alice legitimizes the effective practices of these working-class women healers not only through their consistent presence in the community, but also through their meticulous care to the physical and emotional state of their patients and the prevention of further disease. These were actions that general practitioners were not

making for their patients; there was no specialized care⁴⁹ or extension of physical and emotional healing to the other family members, therefore these women healers were a formidable opponent to formal medical practitioners.

Rough and Ready Nurses: Male Working-Class Healers

Although these examples of healing labor are dominated by women, working class male healers are also present in the novel and provide an important parallel to Alice in terms of their choices for physical healing and ultimately, their representation of resistance to middle class expectations for the working class. While these working-class male healers pose a contrast to professional medical men in the novel, they do not practice healing labor as frequently or have the level of knowledge or influence working-class women healers have in the novel for these skills. John Barton seeks the medical assistance of Alice earlier in the novel when his wife takes ill, supporting the reliance on women healers in the community more so than working-class men. While John Barton's masculinity and his substance abuse with opium has been explored by critics, he has not been thoroughly engaged as a healer. His healing labor is offered as a contrast to middle-class masculinity; the poor take care of their own since the middle class does not extend help to the working classes. As a leader of a trade union, John Barton already occupies a position of power over other men in the union who seek his guidance and leadership; however, his healing labor provides him with a different position of power that does not come along with recognition and possible associations with violence, but rather sacrifice

⁴⁹ Irvine Loudon marks the second half of the nineteenth century as the period in which physicians and surgeons became specialists (238).

and compassion. While his position as a leader for the trade's union came along with these assumed risks regarding the masters of the workhouses, the representation of him engaging in healing labor in the novel dismantles these associations. Instead of the unruly working-class stereotype that the middle class maintained, John Barton's efforts to heal the Davenports were calm, observant, and organized. This labor he performs not only spurs him to pawn the few goods left to his name when he chooses to take care of the Davenports, but it also establishes him as a credible healer in the novel since he is willing to sacrifice everything for their care. As a point of contrast, Alice has more financial stability and relies on the natural outskirts of the area to provide her needs for the healing concoctions and teas she makes. Alice is not without her sacrifices, however. Instead of her income, she sacrificed her opportunity to move back to be with her own immediate family to care for the community. Much like the dedicated efforts Alice demonstrates while caring for others, John Barton and George Wilson made it their mission to care for the Davenports. This concerted effort contrasts with popular expectations for the working-class at the time; instead of participating in violence, these men were healing those in the community with what few resources they had:

He carried the woman to the fire, and chaffed her hands. He looked around for something to raise her head. There was literally nothing but some loose bricks. However, those he got; and taking off his coat he covered them with it as well as he could. He pulled her feet to the fire, which now began to emit some faint heat. He looked round for water, but the poor woman had been too weak to drag herself out to the distant pump, and water there was none. He snatched the child, and ran up the area-steps to the room above, and borrowed their only saucepan with some water in it. Then he began, with the useful skill of a working man, to make some gruel; and when it was hastily made, he seized a battered iron tablespoon (kept when many other little things had been sold in a lot), in order to feed baby, and with it, he forced one or two drops between her clenched teeth. (Gaskell 60)

John's space in the novel is complicated in terms of his position of authority as the leader of the trades union since he does, ultimately, end up committing an act of violence. By contrast, Alice upholds the mandate she creates for herself to use her abilities only to heal and never to harm. She consistently maintains her influence and authority through her tireless efforts to heal rather than commit any violent act. Despite this violent act, he functions in a service position in this scene to nurse the Davenports when they have nothing left, revealing healing labor and domestic skills that are not typically ascribed to working-class men. His knowledge of healing is evident in this scene since his first decision is to chafe the woman's hands to generate heat and encourage circulation. Positioning her body to have her feet facing the fire is yet another effective move he makes in terms of warming the body. Interestingly, John self-medicates with opium at first to cure hunger pangs, which was a common usage of the drug at the time; however, when he is performing healing labor, he is at his clearest and most powerful. Alice never uses opium in the text, though her broad botanical knowledge would make her aware of opium's many uses. As Hans Derks asserts, the users of opium were "...criminals, as deviant from the norms of society, and [that opium was considered to be] a problem drug" (117). According to Virginia Berridge, there was an effort to keep the opium use by the working-class hidden, but despite these efforts, detailed medical investigations confirmed that industrial opium eating was on the rise (8). This opium use for John Barton complicates his character—he attempts to hide his opium use and isolates himself more and more as his addiction worsens, and it ultimately consumes him. Although he was frequently under the influence of opium and does not have ready access to healing

herbs like Alice, he and George Wilson were able to successfully save the lives of most of the Davenport family, with the exception of the patriarch Ben Davenport. John Barton was willing to use his own possessions to make their survival possible. While John and George were not familiar with any kind of formal medical knowledge, they were able to use their available resources to work together and perform healing labor. Alice, by contrast, works alone to gather her herbs, create her concoctions, and heal others. When others help her, it is in a limited position, unlike these male working-class healers who work together in tandem. In this scene, they are deeply connected to the Davenport home, take items from their own homes to support healing labor, provide tender care, and operate in an organized and calm manner. This representation of the working man as also gifted with the abilities of healing labor and domestic skills illustrates the working class as multi-faceted, revealing the humanity they possess. These actions of healing the Davenports and making sacrifices to assist the family disassemble the middle-class ideologies that the working classes are separated from the home, violent, and unruly. In this part of the text, John and George use the domestic space to their advantage and perform the caregiving frequently expected of women during the period; they care for the family with a delicate touch rather than violence.

John Barton and George Wilson are named “rough and tender nurses” who use the available resources to promote healing, and this shift in roles is significant since it not only calls into question the class divides that were in place during the Victorian period, but also reveals a healing community created by the working class: “The two men, rough, tender nurses as they were, lighted the fire, which smoked and puffed into the room as if

it did not know the way to the damp, unused chimney. The very smoke seemed purifying and healthy in the thick, clammy air” (Gaskell 59-60). John and George were able to converse throughout their healing labor with the Davenport family, and each of them took on invaluable roles to help heal them. Much like Alice, they engage in healing labor for the duration of the illness, using all available means to support their efforts. George went to procure tea for Mrs. Davenport, weak and mostly unconscious from exhaustion and starvation. At the same time John cared for the baby, made sure that Mrs. Davenport could be revived by the warmth from the fireplace, and kept Mr. Davenport from hurting himself on the stone floor in the throes of his fever. Later, John Barton goes to the druggist to procure medicine for Mr. Davenport while George takes on the roles of caring for the family in his absence after begging an infirmity order from the Carson family. This choice presents another significant contrast with Alice, who never willingly seeks out the guidance of medical professionals for assistance in her healing labor. In this scene in the novel both men share equal responsibility for the healing labor of the Davenport family. While John Barton provides financial assistance through pawning his own valuable goods, George also aids through his means: “But though ‘silver and gold he had none,’ he gave heart-service, and love-works of far more value” (Gaskell 59). The description of them as “rough and tender nurses” perfectly conveys their complexity as working-class healers; while they have the appearance of rough working men, their approach is as tender as any nurse. Since nurses during the period were implicitly female, the text destabilizes gender roles by placing these men in this specific role of nurse. In the role of nurses, they heal rather than harm. Rather than depict working class men as the

first to commit violence or participate in unruliness, Gaskell subversively places them in opposition to these middle-class assumptions—revealing them as tender healers brings to light this essential aspect of the working class and supports her goal of uncovering shared humanity between the classes.

Yet another subversive move in the novel is inclusion of the multi-dimensional role of Job Legh; working class man, natural scientist, and as I argue, healer. While critics have largely focused on Job Legh as the natural scientist of the novel, I assert that his healing labor should also be examined as a response to dominant middle-class ideologies about the working class. According to Ying Lee, the phrase “working-class man” invokes several nineteenth-century masculine stereotypes; Chartists, violent, and pub-dwelling among the common associations (1). Likewise, Martin Wiener claims that in the Victorian period, working-class men were, “...being described as more dangerous, more than ever in need of external disciplines, and, most of all, *self-discipline*” (3-4). Despite these stereotypes, significant distinctions can be made among fictional representations of male working-class characters. Danielle Coriale posits that Job Legh has frequently been characterized as a peripheral character whose interests offer an alternative to the violent stereotypes of the working class: “Job Legh, a working-class naturalist who prefers insects and plants to politics. Gaskell identifies in working-class natural history an ethical alternative to violence and demagoguery” (3).⁵⁰ Like Alice’s

⁵⁰ While Coriale’s article is largely focused on natural history as a form of liberation from class boundaries: “Natural history thus appears in Mary Barton as a sign of liberation from class constraints, a way of connecting amateurs to a potentially global community of scientists and fostering their knowledge of distant locales. At the same time, however, naturalist knowledge is shown to liberate only those who have access to the elaborate systems of classification that came to define natural history as science during the 1840s” (3).

extensive knowledge of botany and teas, Job is, in many ways, her equal in terms of his knowledge of natural history, including botany. While he never makes his own concoctions for medicinal purposes, he does perform healing labor in a few instances in the novel, most notably when he brings his granddaughter home from London and watches over Alice Wilson following her stroke. Amy Mae King has done the critical work of pairing Job and Alice in terms of their knowledge, and asserts that Job Legh, in particular, “is a symbol of the kind of working-class enlightenment that reformers supported” (258). However, critics have seemingly left his work of healing labor untouched, and while his knowledge of natural history creates a new narrative for working class men in terms of enlightenment, healing labor adds to this new interpretation as well by debunking middle class assumptions. The most significant instance of healing labor that readers see with Job Legh is his telling of how he made a trip to London and left with this granddaughter. He made this journey with Mr. Jennings, baby Margaret’s other grandfather on her father’s side. The context of this telling is to cheer John Barton’s spirits and thus has comic elements; however, it constitutes his healing labor. Job initially desires to visit his daughter Margaret and her husband Frank,⁵¹ but Frank’s father informs him that they both have typhoid fever. Upon arrival, Job tragically learns that they have both died as a result; however, he is then tasked with taking care of his granddaughter Margaret, her mother’s namesake and the only survivor of this tragedy. While stopping for lodging for the night, both Jennings and Job Legh take

⁵¹ It is also worth noting that Frank, a working-class character, died as a result of his healing labor: “She’d caught it first, and Frank, who was as tender o’er her as her own mother could ha’ been, had nursed her till he’d caught it himself...” (Gaskell 101).

turns feeding and caring for baby Margaret: “Babby began to scream o’ th’ oud fashion, and we took it turn and turn about to sit up and rock it...so we left Brummagem...and walked a’ that day, carrying babby turn and turn about...to my mind the babby were getting weaker and weaker...we stopped at a cottage” (Gaskell 103-107). As Job and Jennings care for Margaret, and nurse her as they travel, they also seek out resources in their community along the way, including a chambermaid and the woman who lives in the cottage where they are forced to stop once the baby begins to appear weaker. While Job’s story makes it clear that caring for a baby was foreign to both men, they learned the process and Job ultimately took over the task of raising Margaret for life. This representation of working-class men coming together to perform healing labor for this baby emphasizes skills that are not typically associated with working-class men, adding to their complexity and ultimately exposing middle class readers to a different, more tender sort of working-class man. They are feminized in the novel and written as nurturers rather than emotionally removed or violent. This representation of working-class men as nurses breaks down the violent stereotypes that were in common circulation.

Discordant Practitioners: Contrasts between Medical Men, Working-Class Women Healers, and Rough and Ready Male Healers

Despite the clear class divides in access to medical professionalization in terms of education and the modernization of medicine, women healers in the working class were essential to their communities and were largely unrecognized during the period as a legitimate rival to medical professionals. The medical men throughout *Mary Barton* provide a stark contrast to the women in terms of their methodology, decisiveness,

willingness to assist, and accessibility. In addition, they are largely ineffective. Alice and the rough and ready working-class male healers were effective and decisive as they completed their healing labor in the novel. As Milota noted, the doctors in the text remain unnamed and reveal the disparity in medical care for the working classes.⁵² While Milota rightly notes that Alice represents a positive portrayal of medical care in the novel, she labels her as a “minor counter-example” to the male medical professionals in the novel; however, I argue that she poses a significant challenge to them. Irvine Loudon contends that the traditional enemy of general practitioners was the “irregular practitioner,” but notes that general practitioners were more challenged by their colleagues due to overcrowding in the professional field in the 1840s (241). Although both Milota and Loudon acknowledge these other practitioners, I assert that the working-class woman as healer poses a more formidable challenge than previously acknowledged precisely due to her position in the working-class community and her comparable knowledge through alternative means. Alice is described as having “considerable knowledge of hedge and field simples,” regularly “gathering wild herbs for drinks and medicine” (Gaskell 16). She seeks particular herbs and plants to treat ailments rather than using general treatments.

The unnamed doctors in *Mary Barton* do not rely on specific treatments as Alice does with her herbs, brews, and broths, but rely on the most recent broad advancements and medical treatments instead. On more than one occasion in the text, professionally

⁵² Milota argues that through the medical care provided to the working classes in the novel, Gaskell conveys her views of the inadequate healthcare system for the poor.

educated male doctors arrive on the scene only to rely on the opinions of others or declare the case a lost cause or turn to ineffective methods to resolve ailments. The first doctor readers are introduced to in Chapter III is nameless and reluctantly roused by John Barton when his wife is in labor:

The doctor was very long in hearing the repeated rings at his night-bell, and still longer in understanding who it was that made this sudden call upon his services; and then he begged Barton just to wait while he dressed himself, in order that no time might be lost in finding the court and house...the medical man several times asked him to go slower. (Gaskell 19)

Unlike the readily available Alice, this doctor was slow to respond and far less willing to attend those in need. When his wife initially went into labor John had a neighbor watch over his wife until he could find professional medical help, and “in less than five minutes, she was standing by Mrs. Barton’s bed-side, relieving the terrified Mary” (Gaskell 19). However, the professional medical doctors in the text offered formal knowledge and the most advanced techniques for diagnosis and treating ailments, and while this doctor was unable to prevent the death of Mrs. Barton, at least in his observations and diagnosis he was correct: “Nothing could have saved her—there has been some shock to the system...The doctor seeing the state of the case, grieved for the man; and, very sleepy, thought it best to go, and accordingly wished him good-night—but there was no answer, so he let himself out; and Barton sat on, like a stock or a stone, so rigid, so still” (Gaskell 20). This first doctor presented in the novel has a marked difference from others in that he grieved for John Barton’s loss, and empathy and compassion are traits that the other nameless doctors in the text do not possess.

Alongside the lack of compassionate care, these passages highlight the issues with access to professional medical care for the working class, and ultimately emphasizes why there was a necessity for a healing community among the working class. This working-class healing community was created to supplement a need where resources were lacking. In her 2010 book *Health, Medicine, and Society in Victorian England*, Mary Wilson Carpenter argues that,

The nineteenth century saw a transformation of medicine in Britain...At the beginning of the century, medicine was practiced in England by an assortment of physicians, surgeons and apothecaries whose educations ranged from many years of university study in the classic Greek theory of the body...to a few years apprenticeship with a local surgeon or apothecary...there were also many people, women as well as men, who practiced as...traveling quacks and healers. (4)

While the end of the nineteenth century presented more and more professionalism and formal education as requirements for general practitioners, this assertion indicates the presence of other healers, which were a resource for the working class. The variation in medical knowledge and professionalism is evident with the doctor treating Alice for her stroke; he was indecisive and eventually treated her with leeches. After caring for Alice, Margaret notes the doctor's unwillingness to take a definite stance on her condition in a conversation with Mary: "Oh! Much what all doctors say: he puts a fence on this side, and a fence on that, for fear he should be caught tripping in his judgement. One moment he does not think there's much hope—but while there is life there is hope; th' next he says he should think she might recover partial—but her age is against her. He's ordered her

leeches to her head” (Gaskell 195).⁵³ This act of “putting a fence” on every side of judgement establishes women healers as legitimate rivals; Alice for instance, never relied on the safety of never making a judgement on the best possible treatment for an ailment, but instead moved forward with decisive action when called upon to heal someone in her community. This inability to make a definitive judgement also exposed the inadequacy of the medical professionals available to the working classes and positioned women healers in a more powerful position than outside doctors.

The inadequacy and expense of the professional medical doctors is also reinforced through their lack of desire to treat the working class. Alice’s medical doctor proves to be once more ineffective and indecisive when he is called upon to examine Jane Wilson before Jem’s trial along with his patient Alice. When Mary approaches him, his contrast to Alice’s previous healing labor becomes evident in the priorities he values and the description of his bedside manner: “He was shaking himself after his morning’s round, and happy in the anticipation of his Sunday’s dinner; but he was a good-tempered man, who found it difficult to keep down his jovial easiness even by the bed of sickness or death. He had mischosen his profession; for it was his delight to see everyone around him in pure enjoyment of life” (Gaskell 263). On the other hand, although Alice is by trade a washerwoman, she puts much of her energy into her healing labor. When at the bed of sickness or death, she knows how to make observations, trust her instincts, and say with decisiveness what must be done. She is willing to sacrifice sleep at all hours and her

⁵³ According to notes on the text, “the application of leeches, to draw blood, was standard medical practice for a variety of ailments in this period” (Gaskell 430).

energy to perform this labor for others. By all accounts it appears that healing labor is the driving force in her life and her profession as a washerwoman is her means of sustaining herself to be able to fulfill her desire to serve in this way. She embraces this healing labor and is skilled in healing and comforting those who are sick or dying, and when there was no hope for the physical body, she set herself on healing emotions through therapeutic labor. For example, when her sister-in-law's twins died, she assisted with grieving and made a major life change following their deaths. Following this event she uproots her life to participate in therapeutic labor: "When the twins died, she thought she could, may be, be of use to her sister, who was sadly cast down, and Alice thought she could cheer her up; at any rate she could listen to her when her heart grew overburdened; so she gave up her cellar and went to live with them" (Gaskell 90). This act reveals her knowledge of what is required for emotional healing, particularly grief—a support system is necessary in the coming weeks and months following a loss. In the prime of her healing labor, Alice is more effective at treating the entire person more so than those medical professionals in the novel, who only seem concerned with healing the physical body as quickly and carelessly as possible. Alice took special care to acknowledging the emotional healing that needs to occur as well and devising a plan to carry it out. She also makes herself accessible to thoroughly provide care, which these doctors did not prioritize. Economically, medical doctors were less accessible to the working-class population due to the considerable cost of their care. One marker of the professional status of doctors, according to Timothy Ziegenhagen, was the right to charge consultation fees in the early

nineteenth century (182). Lucinda Beier contends that while many working-class families consulted general practitioners:

...The physician was peripheral to routine household health management, and, in any case, also worked within the home environment in which he (or, more rarely, she) had been invited and where he depended on adult women in the household to carry out his orders. In working-class homes, his authority was negotiated within a culture that employed and often preferred many alternatives to 'the doctor's medicine' (35).

In all the descriptions of Alice's travels to heal the sick throughout the novel she never hesitates to attend them, and she is as accessible as possible given her other responsibilities. By contrast, this lack of accessibility of the professional doctors in the novel references the anticontagionism of the medical professionals during the Victorian era, echoing the same rhetoric used with other communities that are othered. Kristine Swenson refers to this cultural context of bias against the working class in terms of illness: "Anticontagionism took hold in Britain during the cholera epidemic of 1831-1832, and gained official support during the epidemic of 1848-1849...anticontagionism located disease in the homes of the poor...[it] posited that disease was actually generated in....the "filth" of the working-class home" (21). This fear of contamination and illness contributed to the inadequate care of the working class by medical professionals of the period. The alternative practices available in these working-class communities by women healers provided more accessibility without the fear of infection, and therefore, more adequate care.

The inadequacies of professional medical care for the working class is also evident through the prioritization of medical doctors catering to an audience rather than

being effective in treatment. When asked to examine Jane Wilson in anticipation of her son's trial for murder in Chapter XXIV, this medical doctor based his evaluation on what he thought Mary wanted to hear rather than on his expertise: "'Why—a,' began he, perceiving that he was desired to take one side in his answer, and unable to find out whether his listener was anxious for a favourable verdict or otherwise; but thinking it most probable that she would desire the former, he continued" (Gaskell 263). In this scene, the unnamed doctor demonstrates his greater concern with pleasing his audience rather than treating his patient in the necessary ways. The consequences of this inaction, however, could be dire. Alice, by way of contrast, always had a ready remedy or steps to take to promote emotional and physical healing—a particular brew of tea, a roaring fire, knowing when to listen and when to make difficult recommendations, as she had when Jane Wilson's twins were dying. These contrasts ultimately demonstrate the faults in the professional medical community and call into question the quality of care provided by them to the working-class during the period. Irvine Loudon notes that "The Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 provided the opportunity for a comprehensive system of medical care for the poor when they desperately needed it, but parsimony and prejudice against poverty produced a miserable and inadequate system" (246). This unwillingness to use resources and expend energy created the inadequacy of this system; however, the healing labor performed by women in their communities exerted every effort and used every resource. While these working-class women operated in the least recognized levels of society, they offered a formidable alternative medical practice. The value of the depiction of working-class women performing healing labor is in the specific care they

provided without prejudice and efficient and generous use of all available means of healing.

The efficient use of all means of healing depends partially on having a particular treatment determined for the patient, and this attentiveness sets up a significant contrast between the care provided by general practitioners and working-class women healers to the working class. While general practitioners during this period were formally trained in treatments and medicines to dispense, working class women healers such as Alice also had knowledge of specific treatments and applied them as required for the ailment as needed. The difference in care between Alice's healing labor and that of this specific doctor in the text is his unwillingness to prescribe an exact treatment for an ailment he has diagnosed. Additionally, he is unwilling to administer the treatment he has recommended himself: "...I see no cause for apprehension about this poor creature in the next room;--weak—certainly; but a day or two's good nursing will set her up, and I'm sure you're a good nurse, my dear, from your pretty kind-hearted face, --I'll send a couple of pills and a draught, but don't alarm yourself—there's no occasion, I assure you" (Gaskell 264). His admission that "there is no occasion" makes it apparent that he is prescribing these medicines without a specific purpose and for no particular reason--he cannot even name the draught and pills he will send. His approach is one of generalized care with even more problematic choices for his pills and draughts. This lack of attention to his choices for pills and draughts reinforces the point that the working class received inadequate care from medical professionals. Despite the desire for respectability on the part of the general practitioner in the working-class community, the women who perform

healing labor have more trust in this community due to their commitment to provide treatments that were tailored to the need and accessibility. Conversely, Alice always followed through with not only gathering, drying, and concocting her own broths, teas, and brews, but was always present to administer them herself. Instead of having a general recommendation, she sought out the exact herbs for her purpose and went through the process of drying and bunching them as well as mixing and brewing them to a calibrated specificity, tailored to the patient's needs. Additionally, Alice consistently sought out new herbs for her purposes—she was willing to experiment and continuously keep trying new concoctions. She did not entrust others with the care she was willing to provide herself and would never base presumed quality of care on the looks of potential caretakers and confidence. This contrast between general recommendations and tailoring a treatment reveals another division between working-class women healers and general practitioners in terms of the challenges alternative medicine posed. The potential for advancement with treatments and healing comes from the exact kinds of experimentation that Alice practiced, and there was no indication with any of the doctors in the novel that they were open to these kinds of experimentation, nor did they appear to be fully aware of exactly how to concoct a medicine or what was required to create a certain draught. Irvine Loudon establishes the social stigmas attached to druggists, and general practitioners during the period avoided any association with them (241). While working-class women healers operating their alternative practices were viewed as relics of a past system in light of medical advancements, this representation of these women healers signals a critique of this assumption; they were not only capable of prescribing a specific

treatment, but could also make it themselves with their own means while their professional counterparts indecisively prescribed any standard, acknowledged treatment.

Another advantage that working-class women healers had over sanctioned medical practitioners in the novel was the complete attention to healing the entire person physically and emotionally, which establishes the potential effectiveness of these “irregular healers” in Victorian culture. During the doctor’s visit with Jane Wilson before Jem’s trial, he demonstrates this lack of attention to emotional and physical healing through his indecisiveness and resistance to any excitement. Following Mary’s dismay with his conclusion and after confessing her earnest desire for the doctor to write a letter recommending the opposite, the doctor changes his stance:

‘Why did you not tell me so sooner? It might certainly do her harm in her weak state! There is always some risk attending journeys—draughts, and what not. To her, they might prove very injurious, --very. I disapprove of journeys, or excitement, in all cases where the patient is in the low, fluttered state in which Mrs. Wilson is. If you take *my* advice, you will certainly put a stop to all thoughts of going to Liverpool.’ He really had completely changed his opinion, though quite unconsciously; so desirous was he to comply with the wishes of others. (Gaskell 264)

The fickleness of his response reveals the risk of his recommended treatments—they can, at once, be helpful or injurious. They can be a balm for a wounded soul or overwhelmingly exciting for the patient, causing negative results. Another facet of this contrast between medical practitioners and women in the novel is demonstrated by those who are sought out when a medical issue is taking place—the men always go to other men, often medical professionals who are unknown to them and sometimes unwilling to assist while women always seek out other women in their community to assist with

ailments. The women in these roles, on the other hand, are always accessible, responsive to the need, and willing to help in the ways that are possible. Alice in particular appears to be every bit as knowledgeable in her medical pursuits as any of her professional male counterparts, but far more successful and accessible in treating each patient. Her son Will establishes her reliability and expertise once more through his recollection of growing up with her: “When I lived with her, a little wee chap, I used to be wakened by the neighbors knocking her up; this one was ill, and that body’s child was restless; and for as tired as she ever might be, she would be up and dressed in a twinkling, never thinking of the hard day’s wash afore her next morning....And she knew such a deal about plants and birds, and their ways” (Gaskell 189). It is evident that Alice’s knowledge extended to the animal world as well, beyond her already extensive practice of herbs and botany. Her labor is not only limited to healing the body, but also the mind, spirit, and emotions, and she does this through precisely tailoring her treatments with knowledge of the patient and what would best heal them.⁵⁴ While other healing women in the novel do not have the same herbal knowledge as Alice, they rely on one another as a community and are clearly well versed in mental and emotional healing as well.

This community of working-class women that perform healing labor not only create a formidable challenge to the professional male doctor, but they also operate in an accessible network to carry out their work. The doctor tasked with Mary’s health following her illness that occurred after her time on the witness stand was one such

⁵⁴ Alice was gathering nettles at the beginning of the text when she is first introduced, which is commonly associated with aiding in healthy pregnancy. Soon after, she visits the Barton household, where Mary Barton, wife of John Barton, is pregnant.

doctor who had already given up on her as a lost cause: "...the doctors were as yet unwilling to compromise their wisdom by allowing too much hope to be entertained" (Gaskell 335). This response was partially due to the preconceived notions men in the medical profession had about women and their emotional state in relation to illness. Helen Small indicates this bias with her contention that "...[male medical professionals] would have been drawing on a long medical tradition of viewing the physiology of women as cripplingly vulnerable to their emotional state" (15). This perceived vulnerability contributed to the lack of adequate care for women in the working class in particular. Implicit in this doctor's response is the separation of wisdom and hope, but for the working-class character Mrs. Sturgis, these aspects are combined in the practice of her healing labor. In Chapter XXXIV, it was Mrs. Sturgis who nursed Mary back to health, and made it possible for her to heal. Mary's condition was one of physical and emotional ailment: "Sight and hearing were no longer channels of information to that poor distracted brain...Mary still hovered between life and death...she now lay in a stupor, which was partly disease, and partly exhaustion from the previous excitement" (Gaskell 323, 335). Mrs. Sturgis serves as an extension of this community of working-class women healers; she was able to watch her day and night and provided her with tea as well in spite of the professional doctor's lack of availability and guidance. Mary's illness begins, by her own admission, when she looked at the water in search of Will to secure his favorable testimony. When Mary wakes it is not the doctor's recommendations that heal her. In the boyhood room of one of Mrs. Sturgis' sons who was off to sea, it is the comforting aspects of the room that Mary is first conscious of as she wakes, as well as

the consistent presence of Mrs. Sturgis: "...[she was] soothed by the subdued light; and quite sufficiently amused by looking at all the objects in the room...she saw Mrs. Sturgis standing at the bedside with some tea , ready to drop it into her mouth by spoonfuls" (Gaskell 336). Mrs. Sturgis had provided the healing labor that the professional doctor could not—she was consistently accessible, never gave up hope for Mary's return to health, and provided the physical nourishment and care required for her to recover emotionally and physically. While Mrs. Sturgis had never had any formal training, she was able to attempt different methods to heal Mary through her consorted efforts and her willingness to have hope for Mary's recovery aided in her return to health as well. Although Mrs. Sturgis appears to be merely a wife of a seafaring husband and a mother whose children have gone to sea, she represents a vital contribution to the community of women healers in the novel. This role also establishes her in a position of power in terms of Mary's care—her husband becomes a help to her and follows her directions, reversing the typical dynamic of their household. In terms of broader considerations of working-class women's labor, this example of an extended community of women who participate in healing labor establishes that these forms of healing were still prominent in the nineteenth century, though not in the public eye.

Conclusion: Bringing Recognition to Working-Class Women Healers

Through Gaskell's own admission, her purpose for *Mary Barton* was to convey the romantic lives of those she elbowed daily in the streets, but she also successfully brought women healers to the forefront of middle-class readers' attention and challenged middle-class assumptions about working-class women as well as men. Instead of

reinforcing the dangers of work, she reinforced the benefits of healing labor outside of industrial pursuits: chosen labor. These representations of women healers undermine the prominent assumptions of the Victorian age by establishing strong women who are neither morally deficient nor less professional in practice than those medical doctors that have formal education. This portrayal of women healers honors the centuries-old history of global women healers as well. Women's body of knowledge is often inherited generationally amongst women and occurs in an extra-curricular and extra-institutional space, though this does not make their practices less valid or credible. In a time when the medical profession was overrun with general practitioners, Gaskell provides a refreshing alternative to the rushed and inadequate care provided by them through these representations of women healers who treat physical and emotional ailments with specific treatments and care plans. Rather than the previous critical assertion that these healing women served as a minor contrast to those in the formal medical profession, I have established them as making a significant contribution to medical access for the working classes and have expanded these roles to include those in an extended network to support this healing, including communities of working class men. In my next chapter, I will examine the contributions of working-class women who shape outcomes for themselves and others through their labor of visions and fantasy. During a time when women were defined primarily by their domestic and maternal attachments, Gaskell carved out a new and powerful position for working-class women as leaders in their community who provide specialized healing labor. They contributed to an inherited body of knowledge alongside their professional and moral developments. Those that would be previously

dismissed as just another woman in the streets by middle class readers became a new curiosity. This portrayal of women performing healing labor does much to disrupt conventional class divisions during the Victorian period and uncovers the little recognized facet of the widespread healing community that they occupied.

CHAPTER IV

THE HOLLOW BY THE FLARE: WOMEN AS ARBITERS OF NARRATIVE POWER THROUGH FANTASY AND VISIONS IN *OUR MUTUAL FRIEND*

‘...When my strength fails me, if I can but die out quick and quiet, I shall be quite content. I have stood between my dead and that shame I have spoken of, and it has been kept off from every one of them. Sewed into my gown,’ with her hand upon her breast, ‘is just enough to lay me in the grave. Only see that it’s rightly spent, so as I may rest free to the last from that cruelty and disgrace, and you’ll have done much more than a little thing for me, and all that in this present world my heart is set upon’....If she were captured previously, the money would be taken from her as a pauper who had no right to it, and she would be carried to the accursed workhouse. (Dickens 503, 504)

These words from the working-class woman Betty Higden as she approached death expose not only Dickens’ critique of the New Poor Law, but also women’s capacity for visions and fantasy, to predict a favorable outcome and assert power. As Graham Daldry maintains, “*Our Mutual Friend* represents the realism of neither fiction nor narrative, but of a mature vision of the world between”; the arbiters of this world between are these working-class women in the text (165).⁵⁵ It is this world that only these few women can access over the course of the novel, and always with the purpose of taking action and guiding future outcomes for themselves and others. This move was subversive; the working poor were being stripped of even more of their rights and possibilities for relief than ever due to more stringent requirements for assistance an

⁵⁵ Daldry clearly outlines the disparate forces in this in-between world: life and death, coherence and fragmentation, chaos and order, fiction and narrative (165).

mismanagement of the requirements of the new law enacted much earlier in 1837. Dickens' last completed novel, *Our Mutual Friend* (1865) has long had conflicting critical reception, and was a way of responding to the results of the mismanaged law.⁵⁶ Instead of the idealized, caricatured, and whimsical working-class characters he was known for, he presents a different sort of working-class character in this text, particularly in the case of working-class women who use fantasy to assert power and overcome the constraints of society. In my last chapter, I establish how working-class women and men participate in healing labor, but in this chapter, my focus changes from the body to the mind—labor of visions and fantasy performed by working-class women. Two prominent critical studies of Dickens and his portrayal of women are widely known among Dickens scholars: Michael Slater's 1983 text *Dickens and Women* and the more recent 1992 *Dickens, Women, and Language*, by Patricia Ingham. While the former focuses on the nature and position of women in Dickens' novels and the latter deals with the contradictory characteristics of women in his novels, neither examine working-class women in a position of power due to their access to fantasy. Specifically, Slater's classic study uses a biographical approach to examine Dickens's relationships with women as well as his ideas about women's nature and the womanly ideal during the Victorian period. On the other hand, Patricia Ingham establishes that textual explorations of Dickens's portrayals of women are contradictory and puts these portrayals in conversation with non-fiction texts including handbooks on womanly conduct,

⁵⁶ See various articles in *The Dickensian* and *Dickens Studies Annual* for additional articles on this topic. See specifically Molly Anne Rothenberg's article on social agency and Monika Smith's article on consumerist politics in the text.

prostitution documentaries, and Florence Nightingale's *Cassandra*. Instead of the action centering on working-class men who ultimately encourage a change of heart for male characters in elite positions, Dickens places working-class women at the center of the action and the heart of the piece. Primarily, the characters of Lizzie Hexam, Jenny Wren, and Betty Higden were abandoned by fathers who either died, were mired in alcoholism, or otherwise unable to manage their households and livelihoods. While Jenny Wren certainly possesses some of the grotesque elements Dickens was known for, she moves beyond the oddities and inconsistencies these figures are associated with in his other novels to reveal the monstrous elements in those that persecute her.⁵⁷ These three women upend the prominent social narrative of the Victorian period—that working-class women were powerless, invisible, and monstrous. Their ability to create fantasy and visions are a way to make art out of what is considered useless, by women on the margins of society, supporting Lothar Cerny's description of, "An art which uses the bits and pieces regarded as useless, and even what is called 'dust.' It forms them by virtue of the artist's imaginative strength into images which are similar and different from the reality they present, in fact they are superior to reality and provide a perfect image of it. Such art is also playful...momentous...and it creates a semblance of life (qtd. Schaeffer 126). By endowing these women with visions and fantasy, I will argue that Dickens reveals the monstrosity of the society that continued to oppress the working-classes, gives power to those considered the least powerful in society, and broadens roles for women beyond the conventional ones of wife and mother. Unlike their male counterparts, these women in

⁵⁷ Consider the famous Sarah Gamp and Mr. Bumble as a comparison.

the novel, through their narrative power and labor, which I will call visions and fantasy, can alter or manifest their own fate and that of others. This is a direct response to the changing roles and conditions of Victorian working-class women.

Dickens's last complete novel, *Our Mutual Friend* (1865) includes multiple plot lines throughout, however, the ones most relevant to my project deal with working class women. Fittingly, this is where the novel begins—with Lizzie Hexam on the river with her father, whose chosen vocation is dredging bodies from the Thames river. Resistant to the insecurity and ambiguity of river life, Lizzie tasks herself with caring for her father but envisions an academic life on land for her younger brother. Together, Lizzie and her father dredge up the body of who is believed to be young John Harmon, the inheritor of his father's considerable fortune and dust heaps, piles of refuse, that were sold for profit. Father and son were estranged at the time of his death, and Harmon Senior insisted in his will that his son marry Bella Wilfer, a woman in the community that Harmon Jr. had never met. Following her father's mysterious death, Lizzie sends her brother to school and finds work on land for herself. She makes it her mission to find answers to her father's mysterious death. Meanwhile, Jenny Wren, a local doll's dressmaker for the middle-class spends her days making dresses for dolls that are well-known for their intricacy and resplendent appearance. Frustrated by her alcoholic father, she manages their household despite her youth and eventually fosters a close friendship with Lizzie. While both women are able to eventually improve their social position and gain more security. Throughout the novel, Dickens critiques the material system of industrialism and its effects on all classes while exposing the foibles of fashionable society.

Dickensian Contexts: The New Poor Law, Women and the Industrial Revolution, and Mayhew's Influence

An avid supporter of better conditions for the poor, nothing could be more disappointing and abhorrent for Dickens than the standards outlined for the New Poor Law of 1837. Intended to rid the streets of beggars, reduce the costs of provisions for the poor, and incentivize hard work for independence from government support, this revision of the previous poor law relegated the poor to workhouses in which the conditions were appalling. In his Postscript to *Our Mutual Friend*, Dickens removed any doubt regarding his reception of current implementation of the New Poor Law: "I believe there has been in England, since the days of the Stuarts, no law so often infamously administered, no law so often openly violated, no law habitually so ill-supervised. In many of the shameful cases of disease and death from destitution, that shock the Public and disgrace the country, the illegality is quite equal to the inhumanity—and known language could say no more of their lawlessness" (Dickens 799). Dickens was no stranger to the halls of Parliament and used his power to create social change where he could. He also read widely of the plight of the poor with fixed attention and these influences led to some of his most memorable characters and plot lines. It was well-known that both Betty Higden and the Hexam family were inspired by Mayhew's indispensable study *London Labour and the London Poor*.⁵⁸ Adrian Poole, in the compendium to his edition of *Our Mutual Friend*, notes the specific reference to Mayhew's dredgermen, who were known to pick

⁵⁸ See Harland Nelson's landmark critical article "Dickens *Our Mutual Friend* and Henry Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor*."

up coal, bones, pieces of metal, contraband goods, and even bodies (Dickens 802). It was Dickens' reading of an old woman's plight in Mayhew's text that eventually laid the groundwork for Betty Higden. A frequent visitor to workhouses, children's hospitals, and other institutions for the most vulnerable of the British population, specifically the working-class, Dickens used his pen to place women from the working-class in powerful positions of their own making, breaking away from his traditional idealized, though slightly flawed⁵⁹, portrayal of the working classes. This subversive move challenges the genre of the sentimental novel by bridging the sentimental and realistic, presenting women in vulnerable positions with specific power.

Although Dickens did not always have an ideal relationship with the feminist movement, he supported women having rights to their property,⁶⁰ access to education, and means of bettering their lives. This was especially true for women of the working-class, who were most disenfranchised. Although improvements were slow until the end of Victoria's reign, women were making progress during the Industrial Revolution in terms of marriage and sex. During this first wave of feminism, according to Bonnie S. Anderson, advocates such as Lucretia Mott made consistent public appearances to address women's issues including prostitution, forced marriage, and the right to have sex or refuse it (Anderson 10). Some of these advancements also included education, as noted by Monros-Gaspar, though this was not directly accessible to working-class women:

⁵⁹ For example, in *Our Mutual Friend* Dickens presents Jenny Wren as slightly flawed in her desire for vengeance against those children that tormented her as a child.

⁶⁰ For more information regarding Dicken's complicated relationship with feminism and his ideas on women's rights to property, see Wynne's *Women and Personal Property in the Victorian Novel*.

“The nineteenth-century witnessed the foundation of Queens and Bedford Colleges for the education of women; in 1847 a board of professors in King’s College London first provided certificates of proficiency for governesses; in 1869 Girton College opened for women and in 1878 the University of London admitted both men and women on equal terms.” Despite these advancements, however, women were still working more hours than men, carrying a significant weight of the progress of industry. Their contributions to industrialism were significant, though underrecognized. Catriona M. Parratt establishes this hour discrepancy:

The most important measures are usually taken to be the 1847 and 1850 ten-hour acts, the factory extension and workshop acts of the 1860s, and the 1874 act which fixed textile workers’ weekly hours at 56 and a half. These restrictions on work hours were focused on women workers.... the average work day even for women in the most regulated occupations at the turn of the twentieth century was two hours longer than that of unionized male workers. (22)

It is unmistakable that Dickens was aware of the excessive labor women were performing in the working classes, regardless of these new changes. He was certainly aware of the 1842 mines and collieries acts, which required reports on child labor violations by parliamentary commissioners. Due to the shocking conditions they noted, particularly in terms of women’s conditions, they added protective legislation for women into the child labor changes.⁶¹ While his written works have frequently put men at the center of class conflict and also in power, his last novel places women in the working-class at the center

⁶¹ Women were required to work in the mines even while pregnant, nursing, or with severe injury, which are only a few of the appalling conditions the commissioners observed as they were compiling reports.

of the action,⁶² exposing their constant work, but also their exceptional power. Unlike the children that are read as the embers that ignite the compassion of the reader, the women in this novel seize their power, making themselves visible in the realms they create, and ultimately capable of pushing their way to a life that they desire while transgressing class boundaries. In 1860, the first wave of feminism was still in problematic territory in terms of reception by the public, and these women characters were subversive in terms of their social mobility, marriage choices, and their independence outside of marriage. Middle class reader reception was maintained by the embrace of forward motion for women in terms of rights while still retaining some conventions for women.

Reading Fortunes in the Fire: Lizzie Hexam and Deliberate Movement

The river people in *Our Mutual Friend* are, quite expectedly, on the outskirts of society, where the land and water meet at the murky edge, caught in a precarious position that puts them at risk and exposes the indecencies and run-off of glittering Victorian society. The river was initially described as a place of waste, morally and physically: “...down by where accumulated scum of humanity seemed to be washed from higher grounds, like so much moral sewage, and to be pausing until its own weight forced it over the bank and sunk it in the river” (Dickens 30). Despite this precariousness, however, Dickens continuously brings characters back to this source of the river; this mixture of waste and renewal. Lizzie Hexam, one of the heroines of the novel, is immediately established as intertwined with the river—living on it, helping her father work to dredge

⁶² Miss Wade from *Little Dorrit* is another figure who would be relevant for examination with this lens, however, she operates on the margins rather than at the center of the action of the piece.

bodies, and even having been provided for by the river as a baby: “the very fire that warmed [her] when [she was] a babby, was picked out of the river alongside the coal barges. The very basket that [she] slept in, the tide washed ashore. The very rockers that I put it upon to make a cradle of it, I cut out of a piece of wood that drifted from some ship or another” (Dickens 15). Refuse pulled from the river was crafted and re-purposed to care for her as a child, and Lizzie, in turn, always finds her strength near the river—she uses it with her Herculean rescue of Eugene after his near drowning, and claims it even as she works within the urban confines of the city and later, on the mill in the countryside. This connection with the river is problematic, however, given the associations with both waste and redemption throughout the novel, with the former being emphasized more frequently. The river is, as Michelle Allen has asserted, inclusive of filthy material conditions that reflect the decaying social context of the period; it is a site where labor and recreation, beauty and squalor, and urban⁶³ and rural elements are all infused within the tides (90).⁶⁴ On several occasions in the novel,⁶⁵ Lizzie states that she is inseparable from the river and the taint it seems to give her in terms of her social standing, however, the opposite element of fire, used as she reads fortunes, draws her to the future she manifests for herself and others. It is within this flame that she sees the eventual

⁶³ The industrial impact on society was certainly reaching the river as the novel was being written and released, given that the Thames Embankment was being constructed. Dickens lauded it as a most exquisite sanitary effort, and Michelle Allen notes the influence of the Embankment on the text: “*Our Mutual Friend* began appearing in monthly serialization about the same time that construction of the Embankment was first becoming visible...The Thames had become the public stage for working out the problem of filth and the desire for purity in the urban context” (87).

⁶⁴ Michelle Allen establishes that the river is a significant site in the novel, and its range and mingling of sources of waste and redemption contribute to Dickens’ work to redefine the river: “...His great novel of the period affords a different view of both the river and the possibilities of purification” (89).

⁶⁵ For example, her conversation with her brother during her first meeting with Bradley Headstone and her later initial rejection of Eugene, given her association with the river and her station in life.

separation of her brother from their immediate family, and the loss of her father. The hollow of the flame is symbolic; it is the epicenter of her power and the indicator of coming change for not only her social condition, but the circumstances she wills to modify.⁶⁶

The purpose and interpretation of Lizzie's use of fire-gazing in the novel has long been a point of debate between critics. Early critic Garrett Stewart proposed that fire-gazing was not only a response to problematic Victorian society, including oppression of the working class, but also an imaginative tool used for escape by abused and impoverished characters (169). In her article on fire-gazing, Adelene Buckland asserts that "Dickens represented the fire as emblematic of shared experience, of the domestic harmony" and that it simultaneously offers preservation of the static domestic life she is in as well as an imaginative escape from it. Jesse Oak Taylor posits that this association with the fire is indicative of escape from poverty: "Lizzie Hexam often stares into the fire, "reading" stories in its glowing coals—stories of fairies, but also of her brother's future, when he will have left such circumstances behind. The fire generates both narrative and imaginative escape from the very poverty of which it is a signifier" (51). While I agree that she reads stories in the fire that vary between fairies and the future, I assert that these fortunes are not merely an escape from poverty, but an intentional manifestation and alteration of circumstances; it is a means through which Lizzie is able to claim agency to change her role as well as those of others. Instead of an imaginative

⁶⁶ Lizzie changes her social condition from moving her life from the river to the land and supporting herself through her work rather than supporting her father's work.

escape, I argue that these fortunes are strategically created to reclaim power. Each of Lizzie's fortunes in the novel is deliberate, but the first encounter the reader has with Lizzie in this capacity is called a meditation, and it only has one definitive, known outcome: death. This ominous knowledge, however, spurs her to action:

...She stood on the river's brink unable to see into the vast blank misery of a life suspected, and fallen away from by good and bad, but knowing that it lay there dim before her, stretching away to the great ocean, Death. One thing only, was clear to the girl's mind. Accustomed from her very babyhood promptly to do the thing that could be done—whether to keep out weather, to ward off cold, to postpone hunger, or whatnot—she started out of her meditation, and ran home. (Dickens 77)

Lizzie's position in this passage clearly indicates her power and her deliberate actions to try to prevent death. She has kept out, warded off, and postponed natural occurrences of weather, cold, and hunger. In this case, the life laid before her, stretching to the ocean of death, could most immediately be interpreted as an indicator of the coming death of her father Gaffer, but the river could also lead to death for Lizzie and her brother Charley. This metaphor of the river reaching to the ocean of death is bound up with Lizzie, but instead of the inevitable course the river will take, she is doing what she can to try to hold it back. While she was unable to see into the "vast blank misery," she had a sense of knowing that death was coming, and instead of accepting that outcome, she instead roused herself and was determined to act to try to control the outcome (Dickens 77).

One of the most significant ways that Lizzie reveals this ability to control and create outcomes is through the fortunes she reads in the fire: "When I look at it of an evening, it comes like pictures to me..." (Dickens 37). While fire is known to be unruly,

Lizzie reads in the hollow of the flame steadily, all while protecting her fortune in the fire from scattering due to intervention from her brother Charley—she controls the elements. This scene between Lizzie and Charley predicts Charley’s severance from the family to pursue his education and establish social standing on his own, while also emphasizing the differences in perception between the two characters. The structure of the fortune begins with the past, and her caring for her brother as her father was gone: “You are rather heavy to carry, Charley, and I am often obliged to rest. Sometimes we are sleepy and fall asleep together in a corner, sometimes we are very hungry, sometimes we are a little frightened, but what is oftenest hard upon us is the cold...sometimes it rains and we creep under a boat...sometimes it’s dark, and we get among the gaslights, sitting watching the people as they go along the streets” (Dickens 37). Presenting these pictures of the past serve multiple purposes: to emphasize the collective “we” before the fortune telling of the future sets them each on diverging paths, as an act of preservation of memory, and as an insight into their position in society. The use of “we” here, for Lizzie, is a deliberate choice—it shows Charley his ties to the family and the river, and the shared memory she will always preserve for them. The choice to begin her narrative with the past also gives her the power to persuade Charley to follow the path she will direct him to at the end of this fortune; to pursue his education away from the family. She uses his emotional bond with her to strengthen her case for their leaving one another. While they were children, they would watch the people go as they sat among the gaslights, but these passers-by took no notice of them. As people from the river, they were ignored as much in the city limits as they were outside of it. This neglect was par for the course with Victorian society, but

Lizzie wanted him to be recognized, make his own way, and have a respectable position. Lizzie, in these pictures of the past, endures all these circumstances with Charley, but also carries him; she shapes the narrative of their past together, and once more, she can stave off the cold and hunger that plagued them. This act of sharing the pictures in the fire places Lizzie in a powerful position—she is not only the caregiver for her brother and the helper to her father, but the preserver and shaper of their family experience and story; she is the entertainer for the last salvageable part of her brother's childhood. She uses the fire to prepare Charley for the dismantling of the family she had already predicted.

The use of fire-gazing to disrupt the domestic ideal of a complete family is in direct opposition to how Dickens previously used fires to bring families together in other texts, and it creates a position of power for the gazer. Adelene Buckland contends that, despite the arguments that the hearth is a place of renewal or a response to the problems of the city, "Dickens's hearth is not a trouble-free paradise, but a space in which many of his most central concerns would sit in unequal, and unresolved, tension". Lizzie's fire-gazing in *Our Mutual Friend* is never a trouble-free paradise but is most often the place to which she returns when she stands upon the precipice of significant change; it is here that she takes initial action. It is hardly a place for domestic companionship, though it has kept her family physically warm after long days in the elements. These pictures of the past serve as a noticeable contrast to the life that Charley will eventually lead as he makes his way to a higher position in society, but it is ultimately Lizzie's powerful shaping of this narrative that spurs him to pursue this path in the first place. She directs him to observe the hollow of the flame, which is where these fortunes are created. Lizzie then

proceeds to future predictions when asked to do so by Charley. She sees herself clinging to her father and her brother pursuing his education to the highest degree, causing a rift between himself and the rest of his family: “You come to be a pupil-teacher, and you still go on better and better, and you rise to be a master full of learning and respect...I see, as plain as plain can be, that your way is not ours, and that even if father could be got to forgive you...that way of yours would be darkened by our way” (Dickens 38). There is a noticeable shift in the future fortune telling with the use of “yours” and “ours,” and she has already begun the work of breaking up the domestic ideal in the home, upsetting the conventional role of Victorian women to sustain the household. Instead of taking on the more traditional female role of keeping the family intact and caring for each person, Lizzie is instead intentionally breaking up her family for the betterment of her brother. While her act is sacrificial considering her desire to also have an education, she was initially choosing to stand by her father and sustain his emotions to prevent him from engaging with evil or becoming less moral. Anne Sullivan observes that Lizzie’s fire-gazing is not childish fancy but offers a humanizing alternative to traditional literacy and “a more creative reverie...skillfully combining conscious and unconscious modes of perception, Lizzie’s fire-gazing produces pictures from their personal histories rather than simply repeating the history of the coal itself.” This skillful combination that Lizzie performs lends her to fantasy and fortune telling. Her fortune telling establishes her in a higher position of power than that of her father—she can sway him and keep him in check, and without her guidance, he would ultimately be diminished by his more animalistic impulses.

Along with the shift in power that is noticeable in this fortune, imminent class divisions and hurdles against social mobility are also referenced with the acknowledgement that his way would be darkened by their way as he moved into a more reputable class in order to pursue his education. One of the monstrous elements of society that is exposed with this fortune is Charley's inability to embrace and claim his past while pursuing social mobility. The topic of social mobility during this period was hotly debated, and on either side of the debate, at the center were men in power, despite the growing social access of women that occurred in the late nineteenth century. Women were engaging more in varied work, political activism, and gaining more independence in the late nineteenth century. In 1864, a year before the publication of *Our Mutual Friend*, Walter Bagehot, who was well-known for his essays and candid journalism contended that everyone had equal opportunity for social growth: "a system of removable inequalities, where many people are inferior to and worse off than others, but in which each may in theory hope to be on the level with the highest below the throne, and in which each may reasonably, and without sanguine impracticability, hope to gain one step in social elevation, to be at least on a level with those who at first were just above them" (qtd. in Umunc). Likewise, Edward Bulwar-Lytton proposed that wealth was the only significant marker for having the ability to be socially mobile: "everybody seemed to be aspiring to be on the move—upwards; and each stage of the advance was associated with the acquisition of money" (qtd. in Umunc). For this last completed novel, Dickens still honored his original goal of getting middle-class readers to notice and act against the ills of the poor, but it is the women that aspire to this upward move, achieving a small

measure of social mobility from their own work rather than their relationships to men as wives or daughters. Jenny Wren and Lizzie Hexam build on their own work to become stable rather than on their fathers or male partners. Jenny builds a doll's dressmaking business and Lizzie by contributing to a rural working community on the outskirts of the city. Both Charley and Lizzie made social advancements, but by slow strides. To thrive would require complete severance from the darkness of the river and this lower class, and yet, the same is not true for Lizzie—after she leaves the river, she finds herself in a secure place and wholly self-reliant.

The river people are associated with the darkness, however, and this fortune comes out of the hollow of the flame, where darkness is most prominent. There are advantages to this darker world that Charley will be leaving, and Lizzie has mastered each of them—she has learned how to sustain herself, how to dredge (though she admittedly has a distaste for it), how to salvage and make use of any item, and how to embrace her association with the river and wield the power that comes along with fantasy. This last advantage may be the greatest of them all, considering that her embrace of the river leads her to save Eugene's life at the end of the novel. Following Charley's departure and her father's death, Lizzie is not inclined to go out and pursue finding a marriage or a home to manage, but instead finds Jenny, who needs a friend and confidante. Once more, she is breaking away from the conventional standards and roles for women with this shared access to fantasy, and effectively becomes self-sustaining while sharing a space with Jenny Wren and the ever-drunk Mr. Dolls. Though seemingly different in terms of lifestyles and trades, Jenny and Lizzie share their access to fantasy to

direct their lives. As Deborah Wynne observes, “Dickens rarely seems comfortable with female characters who can wield power by means of their wealth” (57). While Lizzie never has access to traditional wealth, it appears that Dickens was comfortable with allowing women power by means of their access to the realm of fantasy, which significantly lifts them out of their harsh circumstances. Rather than simply compensating for their circumstances, their access to fantasy enables Lizzie and Jenny to remove themselves from the struggles imposed upon them previously by their class. Jenny is eventually relieved of the burden of her alcoholic father and able to grow her business making doll’s dresses for more and more middle-class women in the community while Lizzie can choose her fate and embrace education and civilized society rather than exist on the outskirts of the river.

This power through access to the realm of fantasy is prominently displayed within the collective fortune/vision between Lizzie and Jenny Wren. In this scene in the novel, fantasy is once again used to expose the monstrous elements of society, particularly in terms of being required to sacrifice love due to the requirements of society—Lizzie creates a lady she thinks more worthy of Eugene than herself. Critics have studied this scene in terms of homoeroticism, but never with consideration to the power of their collective access to this other realm of fantasy. As they lay by the fire, looking only to its glow, Jenny urges Lizzie to consider herself as a match for Eugene Wrayburn; to manifest herself as a lady. When Lizzie says her fancy can never get her that far, Jenny urges her to investigate the fire and create her fortune. At Jenny’s direction, she creates a

lady within the hollow of the flare who she holds far above and separate from herself, though she is her own creation:

“The hollow down by the flare?”

“Ah, that’s the name! You can find a lady there, *I* know.”

“More easily than I can make one of such material as myself, Jenny.”

.....

“Only put me in that empty place, only try how little I mind myself, only prove what a world of things I will do and bear for you, and I hope that you might even come to be much better than you are, through me who am so much worse, and hardly worth the thinking of beside you.” (Dickens 343-344)

By her own admission, she can never come near this lady of standing she has created in her fortune; instead of having the power to pluck herself or another out of their circumstances, in this scene, she is relegated to an empty place, and hopes the lady she formed will come to be better “through [her] who [is] so much worse” (Dickens 344). This moment in the text hearkens to a candid critique of the hierarchy of the social classes, and specifically those divisions between women in different classes—upper-class women secured stability and access to luxury through the work of those who were considered below them. It was the working-class women of the period that provided all the finery that they enjoyed. Through their labor, upper-class women were able to gain their material desires. This fortune appears to be the inverse of what Jenny experiences with her dolls; while she uses upper-class women for her own purposes to try on the dresses and makes them her slaves,⁶⁷ Lizzie creates a lady who will be strengthened by Lizzie’s sacrifices and her willingness to confine herself to an empty space where she is

⁶⁷ Jenny inverts the power structure in this business transaction—instead of her working for the women, she describes them as enslaved to her and therefore without autonomy of any kind, with her at the head of the hierarchy.

hardly worth thinking of in comparison. This is a move away from her previous power—she is creating something more capable than herself that requires her to become less visible in the process. As a response, however, Jenny calls to the children of her vision to help Lizzie instead of her. Pain created these visions of the children, as Jenny indicates, and so she calls them to aid Lizzie in her time of pain: “O my blessed children, come back in the long bright slanting rows, and come for her, not me. She wants help more than I, my blessed children!’ She stretched her hands up with that higher and better look...” (Dickens 344). This higher and better look indicates that Jenny was having a vision as she beckoned her children; she used her power to lift Lizzie out of her lowest place, away from the emptiness.

Their physical appearances in the novel, particularly in this scene, is a subversive move on the part of Dickens to include working-class women in traditional standards of beauty, thereby making their collective vision more credible. The darker skin of Lizzie⁶⁸ was considered exotic, and along with Jenny’s shimmering blonde hair,⁶⁹ these are not typical portrayals of working-class women in Victorian literature. Lizzie Hexam is deliberately portrayed as exotic in appearance, and clearly embodies the idea of the Victorian gypsy figure, a sub-set of the Victorian working-class. Monros-Gaspar notes

⁶⁸ She is initially described as “a dark girl of nineteen or twenty...in the intensity of her look there was a touch of dread and horror” (Dickens 13).

⁶⁹ Shimmering blonde hair is a common trope of idealized women in Victorian fantasy and fairy tale pieces, such as Rossetti’s *Goblin Market* and Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland*. Jenny’s hair is certainly linked to her connection with fantasy, as evidenced by how it captivates viewers: “As she spoke, she untied a band, and the golden stream fell over herself and over the chair and flowed down to the ground. Miss Abbey’s admiration seemed to increase her perplexity” (Dickens 434).

that gypsy⁷⁰ women were portrayed as alien and colorful, with dark skin, hair, and eyes. Deborah Epstein Nord establishes the prevalence of the gypsy figure in British literature and argues that, “Unlike colonial subjects...Gypsies were a domestic or an internal other, and their proximity and visibility were crucial features in their deployment as literary or symbolic figures. Their familiarity lent them an exoticism that was, at the same time, indigenous and homely” (3). The association with this gypsy figure lends Lizzie’s character even more mystery since she is wandering from place to place and unattainable in traditional terms. Beauty was one way to assist middle-class readers to invest in the characters; if middle- and upper-class women see themselves in the appearance of characters, even those who are of a vastly different social standing, they will be more likely to invest in their plight. Dickens knew very well this method of towing the social line by making these women particularly visible and appealing, rather than easily dismissed as part of the crowd. In this scene, there are two women who would be dismissed by the rest of society, as they have described, and yet, with their bond and experience, they are able to care for one another and build power once again. By presenting these women as able to salvage one another, Dickens placed working-class women at the forefront of the reader’s attention, reminding them not only of their individual power, but also of their collective agency.

Another female alliance in the text that starkly reveals the agency of Lizzie as a working-class woman is her relationship with Bella Wilfer. While Bella called herself

⁷⁰ Here I am referring to how the term “gypsy” was used in the nineteenth-century, as opposed to the current reference of Roma gypsies today.

poor before being ushered into luxury via the Boffins, she was never in a working-class position like that of Jenny or Lizzie, but she can bond with Lizzie at the urging of her husband John Rokesmith, who had secretly cleared the name of Lizzie's father. At this point in the novel, Lizzie was in hiding and working in a mill, but still never far from the river, a portion of which stretched to meet her there. Lizzie remembered the power of the flame--"There was silence between them. Lizzie, with a dropping head, glanced down at the glow in the fire where her fancies had been nursed, and her first escape made from the grim life out of which she had plucked her brother, foreseeing her reward" (Dickens 517-518). This scene in the novel complicates Lizzie's character; her father Gaffer represents the river, and he never entertained her fancies. However, the language in this passage outlines the mothering relationship between her fancies and the fire—they had been nursed there for her. Fire, the source of her fortune telling, is also a kind of nourishment for her that is impossible in the world outside of the flame—in the hollow of the flame, she can manifest the future and reward she desires, for herself and others. This passage further establishes that even the removal of her brother Charley was orchestrated and executed with the reward she foresaw, and she had the position of power to pluck her brother from their grim life. She had foreseen the separation of the family, but also the reward she would get for aiding Charley in pushing himself. Ultimately, Lizzie is in a position where she not only has anonymity, but she also has some of the river near her, and she was divorced from domestic service. In this instance, Lizzie foretells Bella accepting a love that will never change or be daunted, once won: "I used once to see pictures in the fire," said Lizzie playfully, "to please my brother. Shall I tell you what I

see down there where the fire is glowing...A heart well worth winning, and well won. A heart that, once won, goes through fire and water for the winner, and never changes, and is never daunted” (Dickens 520). This is a bold move for Dickens, for again he has presented a relationship that moves away from traditional marriage standards and monetary worth, and instead places emphasis on emotional worth. Lizzie’s enticement of Bella to participate in the fortune also demonstrates her power—by saying that the pictures were used to please her brother, she found a way to give Bella her fortune along with trust. In this moment, she also reveals that she can keep this power of fortune telling to herself depending on her circumstances, and that she is building on her perceptions of potential that is already present in the listener: “I know I could not make you understand, if the understanding was not in your own breast already” (Dickens 519). The expectation that Bella would share her fortune telling experience with Rokesmith was evident, thereby not only reinforcing Bella’s need to be center-stage, but also encouraging Rokesmith to stay the course—Bella’s love for him would be loyal and not overcome by fire and water.

Jenny Wren’s Visions and the Embodiment of Power in the Child-Woman

During the cold and blustery winter of 1863-1864, Dickens began his final novel, *Our Mutual Friend*, returning to the monthly installment format after years of absence from the form. A consistent participant in written correspondence, Dickens carried on several relationships through letter writing, and one such notable relationship was with fellow writer John Forster. It was to him that Dickens confided part of his inspiration for the novel in his 1862 letter:

I must entreat you to pause for an instant, and go back to what you know of my childish days, and to ask yourself whether it is natural that something of the character formed in me then, and lost under happier circumstances, should have reappeared in the last five years. The never to be forgotten misery of that old time, bred a certain shrinking sensitiveness in a certain ill-clad, ill-fed child, that I have found come back in the never to be forgotten misery of this later time. (1.53, qtd. Cotsell 3)

By his own admission, Dickens could never overcome the impression that being in the working-classes made on him, and this certainly changed the way he presented working-class characters. His days in the blacking factory shaped the way he perceived the world and the goodness in it, and he used the most unseen faces and unheard voices of his time to tell his stories and win the sympathies of his middle- and upper-class readership. Likewise, his personal observations from visiting workhouses and hospitals colored his treatment of children in his novels. In an article written for his weekly magazine *Household Words* in 1850, Dickens observed, “I saw Thirty Thousand children hunted, flogged, imprisoned, but not taught—who might have been nurtured by the wolf or bear so little of humanity had they, within them or without—all joining in this doleful cry.” This lack of humanity “within them or without” was, according to Dickens, the fault of the society that had so sorely neglected them. While the children are all joined in a doleful cry in this recollection, Dickens made it one of his primary aims to give them individual voices in his novels. The way he presented children in his work has come under considerable critical investigation,⁷¹ and these characters have been time-honored

⁷¹ See K.J. Fielding’s classic study *Charles Dickens: A Critical Introduction* (1964) as well as Andrea Warren’s exhaustive work on how Dickens implemented his experience with street children into his fiction in *Charles Dickens and the Street Children of London* (2011). Rosemarie Bodenheimer asserts that, “a Dickensian childhood is defined by its abnormality...through its implicit violations of ordinary, familiar assumptions about the nurturance, growth and safety of children” (13).

in their memorable and unmistakable Dickensian qualities of hopefulness and redemption, despite their conditions. One such character, though, breaks away from this traditional expectation for a Dickensian child: Jenny Wren in *Our Mutual Friend*. Immediately associated with an enigmatic appearance and indeterminate age, she is a woman child endowed with the capability of visions that ultimately empower her amidst a society that deems her invisible and damaged.

The first impression readers get of Jenny Wren is an indeterminate one, and elements of fantasy are already imbued with her first mention through the observations of Charley Hexam and Bradley Headstone: “The parlour door within a small entry stood open, and disclosed a child—a dwarf—a girl—a something—sitting on a little low old-fashioned arm-chair, which had a kind of little working bench before it. “I can’t get up,” said the child, “because my back’s bad, and my legs are queer. But I’m the person of the house” (Dickens 222). Her back and legs are those of an older, infirm person, but her hair and height seem to indicate a childlike appearance. The use of these long dashes and the phrase “a something” make it evident that her appearance and demeanor are a mystery, and the impressions she gives are ever-changing. The progression from a child, to a dwarf, then a girl and an inexact “something” demonstrates that perceptions of her are inconclusive, but she immediately places herself in a position of power with her declaration that she is the person of the house. With this title, not only her appearance, but also her gender is ambiguous, owing to the discomfort of Charley and Headstone.

Following this first meeting, when Lizzie and Charley reunite, he reveals his conceptions of the Doll’s Dressmaker, which directly relates to her ambiguity as well as

her associations with fantasy: “How came you to get into such company as that little witch’s? ...a little crooked antic of a child, or old person, or whatever it is” (227-228). In examining the term “antic” further, it is immediately associated with the grotesque, but particularly those of “fantastic incongruity.... An ornamental representation, purposely monstrous, caricatured, or incongruous, of objects of the animal or the vegetable kingdom, or of both combined” (OED). While Jenny certainly has some monstrous associations and caricatures, her fantastic incongruity demonstrates her access to the natural world and that of fantasy as well. The Doll’s Dressmaker is, in this instance, called into question in terms of her humanity with Charley’s admission of “or whatever it is” (228). Here, the element of fantasy is established with Jenny as the last in a list of attempts to pinpoint the category she resides in, and the least familiar—child, old person, whatever it is (227-228). “It was difficult to guess the age of this strange creature, for her poor figure furnished no clue to it, and her face was at once so young and so old. Twelve, or at the most thirteen, might be near the mark” (Dickens 224). The statement that “her poor figure furnished no clue to [her age]” indicates that her body was compromised by her labor—it made it difficult to determine her actual age because her youthful appearance was challenged by the atypical appearance of her body. Her face is the focal point of this passage, and it possesses the appearance of being at once both young and old, while also portraying a certain sharpness that is frequently referenced. While it can be guessed that her age is between twelve and thirteen, she occupies an indeterminate space, and cannot so easily be categorized. The result of her labor is being unable to perform as a child while doing the work of an adult, though the body still has a childlike

appearance beyond any outward display of disability. This indeterminate age also reflects women's anxiety with aging in a society that valued a perfect, youthful appearance and their subsequent removal from a market of value once age was advanced. This was of particular concern for working class women, who aged rapidly due to the nature of their work. Jenny's indeterminacy and ability to appear at once a child and an adult give her access to adult situations, while being able to maintain her childlike whimsy.

Throughout the novel, Jenny is consistently associated with this indeterminacy, but she has created her own position of power through her fantasy and visions. Her position in her household is an extension of her fantasy. Her world of visions and fantasy are not an escape from her life, but a way to exert power in a world that has taken it away from her due to her lameness, her unfortunate position as the daughter of an alcoholic, and part of the working-class. In her crucial study on age inversion in Victorian literature, Claudia Nelson asserts that "the great majority of literary child-women...exist in conjunction with missing or inadequate parents...although the narratives that contain this type of child-woman speak of her with conscious pity as sacrificial victim, they simultaneously present her as powerful benefactor" (Nelson 112-113). As a child-woman, Jenny fits these criteria in terms of existing in conjunction with missing and inadequate parents. The depiction of Jenny in the novel, however, is never associated with pity—she makes the world she desires through the creation of her doll's dresses and her visions and fantasy, which always portray her as a powerful force that controls the action. For instance, by taking on the role of a disgruntled mother to her disobedient child (her father

Mr. Dolls), she is not a victim,⁷² but instead the one that scolds her father after his drunken nights of absence. In Laura C. Berry's landmark book *The Child, the State, and the Victorian Novel*, she claims that, "The world of work is an adult one; or else, when it involves children, it is viewed by men like Dickens as a fate worse than the workhouse, ample evidence for which can be seen in the child labor discussions of the period" (61).⁷³ Indeed, Dickens always exposed this fate for laboring children in a way that got his audience's attention, but Jenny Wren is a particularly engaging subject to consider precisely because her age is always in question. She is repeatedly referred to as a woman-child, and specifically as a child in appearance, but a woman in maturity.

This debate regarding Jenny's position as a woman-child extends to her access to forms of the natural and unnatural, and ultimately, she is in a hybrid state throughout the novel. In his article "The Dolls' Dressmaker Re(ad)dressed: Jenny Wren's Critique of Childhood, Femininity, and Appearance," Ben Moore argues that Jenny's role is to "deform conventional depictions of childhood, to call the natural into question by means of the unnatural" (Moore). Noting the critical debate regarding whether she should be interpreted as angelic or monstrous, Moore claims that it is precisely her inability to be categorized so simply that makes her significant. I extend his claims by arguing that Jenny uses the conventions of the natural and the disruptions of the unnatural to create a fantasy world that is subversive, given her otherwise disenfranchised state. She acts as a

⁷² This claim is, of course, excepting the pity Lizzie attempts to produce in her brother Charley when he asks why she is associated with Jenny, citing that she was neglected and surrounded by the worst possible vices of alcoholism: "This poor ailing little creature has come to be what she is, surrounded by drunken people from her cradle—if she ever had one, Charley" (Dickens 227).

⁷³ The mines and collieries commission were one such prominent discussion of women's labor, and it conflated women's and children's labor to some extent.

figure that is caught somewhere between the natural world and the unnatural, and this access to both worlds creates power in her dealings with not only her father, but with others whom she views as adversaries or otherwise oppressive. She claims her title as Person of the House, but also her name Jenny Wren (previously Fanny Cleaver), and her position as “mother” to her father in the text. Performing the active labor of creating her fantasy world not only exposes the monstrosity of the society she is in, but also expands her role beyond that of a daughter, wife, or mother, which were conventional roles for women during the period, to an ambiguous other that disrupts the domestic ideal.

While her disruption of traditional domestic ideals is one way in which she exerts power, Jenny Wren is further complicated by her association with traditional standards of beauty with the appearance of her face, and, her hair. However, despite this beautiful appearance she was also associated with sharpness, which is no doubt suggested by her previously shed name of Fanny Cleaver, but also her intelligence and cunning: “The queer little figure, and the queer but not ugly little face, with its bright grey eyes, were so sharp, that the sharpness of the manner seemed unavoidable. As if, being turned out of that mould, it must be sharp” (Dickens 222). She is capable of not only self-sufficiency despite her perilous circumstances, but named herself the “Person of the House,” serving as a gatekeeper of the comings and goings of her home.

Jenny’s visions establish a position of power for her through her superior creation and her role in the visions—the world she creates is at once more vivid and more nuanced than the one she exists in over the course of the novel. She uses the descriptor of “my”

birds and “my” flowers to convey that she is the creator of these elements in her visionary realm:

“I daresay my birds sing better than other birds, and my flowers smell better than other flowers. For when I was a little child,” in a tone as though it were ages ago, “the children that I used to see early in the morning were very different from any others that I ever saw. They were not like me; they were not chilled, anxious, ragged, or beaten; they were never in pain. They were not like the children of the neighbours; they never made me tremble all over, by setting up shrill noises, and they never mocked me. Such numbers of them too! All in white dresses, and with something shining on the borders, and on their heads, that I have never been able to imitate with my work, though I know it so well.” (Dickens 238)

Jenny intentionally separates herself from the other children in her vision as well as those children she endured in the earthly realm. Critics have discussed these children in terms of religious allegory, given their white-clad appearance. Both Malcolm Andrews and Michael Wheeler have connected this vision of the children in slanting rows with religious references (Moore). However, I argue that through this description and her lack of ability to recreate it in her work, Jenny establishes that her mental labor to create in her visionary world is far superior to any skill she has in an earthly realm. There, she is free to create at will not only beautiful surroundings and creatures that cannot be replicated earth side, but also children who are divinely compassionate, thereby granting her a divine power. Precious Stearns contends that “The emancipated women, in Dickens, are those women who work for profit.... I find Dickens's exploration of the complexity of women's lives in Victorian England most pronounced in the characters of Jenny Wren and Mrs. Sairey Gamp”. There is no more involved exploration of the complexity of women’s lives than that which occurs with Jenny Wren and her visions. At first glance,

she is a simple dolls dressmaker, but beneath her lameness and her superb talent is an even more sharply honed skill: creator of her visions. The children that she creates in her vision have no anxiety and were never beaten, and they never scare or mock her. In this vision, Jenny is still conscious of the stark contrasts with her life in the working-class, but in creating these children, she exerts power to change the circumstances—here children are under her command, kind to her, and inclusive. Again, and again throughout the novel, she references the children as coming to her in times of pain. Unlike a traditional mother figure, she creates these children, but they nurture her and others at her command, including Lizzie and Eugene in separate instances. The statement that she was never able to achieve it in her work indicates that her visionary work is superior to the most beautiful creations she can achieve with her dolls. Although she is constrained by her position as a member of the working classes and the limits of her skills, this power is one she does not have as a member of the working-class; although known for her skilled trade, she is still aware of imperfections in her work.

The process of her work in the visionary realm is an active one for Jenny. Benjamin Moore states that Jenny is an active interpreter of her work: “Jenny becomes an active producer and re-producer of images, rather than their passive receiver.... both are images generated by, and then played with and reinterpreted by, Jenny herself” (Moore). Jenny not only reinterprets her work but makes her fantasies the basis of it; instead of just observing her inspiration for her dresses, she makes the women she watches the tools that she manipulates for her success. She shifts the power dynamic between herself and these women in her fantasy; while they either ignore her or consider her a blight, she is silently

using them for her purposes. Her conversation with Riah reveals the monstrosity of the society she is in; these upper class women use her for their purposes, but she changes her position from being invisible to a creator and owner who manipulates her subjects: “All the time I am only saying to myself, ‘I must hollow out a bit here; I must slope away there,’ and I am making a perfect slave of her, with making her try on my doll’s dress....I dare say they think I am wondering and admiring with all my eyes and heart, but they little think they are only working for my dolls” (Dickens 431). In this vision, she is making her own doll of the society women that either ignore or chide her, reversing the power dynamic. Stearns claims that “Only through the symbolic action of casting and dressing is Jenny able to hang those pretty, privileged ladies up by their ankles... Jenny Wren, then, becomes a testament to the working-class women who laboured honestly and did not succumb to moral depravity”. Jenny’s vision is her way of exacting justice for her plight; although these women think they are using her for their own purposes to purchase her dolls, she is, in fact, drawing her power from them. She is not only building her business from their need for commodities, but also using their comings and goings for her inspiration.

Betty Higden and Visions of Dignity in Death

Visions for Betty Higden were both an act of preservation for the memory of her family and are what spurred her on a journey to die with dignity. According to Schaffer, “Betty’s death can be read, not as a stumbling deterioration toward a miserable oblivion in the shadow of a factory, but as rebirth” (133). Shaffer additionally cites Allen’s point that Betty recovers the moral innocence of childhood. I extend her argument to address

her death as symbolic as well—considering the horrific outcomes of the Poor Laws that Dickens was railing against, Betty Higden can die with dignity and receives help from other working-class people in the novel, most notably the Boffins and Lizzie, to achieve her desired end. Following the death of little Johnny, the last living relative of Betty's, she feels death closing in on her and refuses to be idle. As she travels and sells her wares, she has visions of her family that have gone from this world: "...She thought she saw the forms of her dead children and dead grandchildren peopling the barge, and waving their hands to her in solemn measure, then, as the rope tightened and came up, dropping diamonds, it seemed to vibrate into two parallel ropes and strike her, with a twang, though it was far off" (Dickens 500). When questioned by the Loch authority, she reveals that the "deadness" had come over her and is barely able to evade possible capture. I assert that this vision places her in a position of power while also providing a social critique of the conditions of the working-class. She is linked to all those family members who have died before her, each as a result of the poverty they had experienced. The diamonds falling as the rope tightened up reveal their worthlessness in this land of the dead—the wealth that was prized in society and inaccessible to the working-class was nothing compared the vibrational power of being connected to family through this vision. In the text, this vision is described as a "confusion that stole into her mind" (Dickens 500). In this instance, her vision overtook her in a moment of rest while on her journey, but it aided her to continue working toward securing her death in a safe place. For Betty, it was precisely the voices of the dead and the task of caring for Johnny once more that kept her going. However, this later vision named her a murderer on the run:

By what visionary hands she was led along upon that journey of escape from the Samaritan; by what voices, hushed in the grave, she seemed to be addressed; how she fancied the dead child in her arms again, and times innumerable adjusted her shawl to keep it warm; what infinite variety of forms of tower and roof and steeple the trees took; how many furious horseman rode at her, crying, 'There she goes! Stop! Stop, Betty Higden!' and melted away as they came close; be these things left untold. Fairing on and hiding, hiding and faring on, the poor harmless creature, as though she were a Murderess and the whole country were up after her, wore out the day, and gained the night. (Dickens 504)

The title of Murderess marks her as an outlier, but also as one suspected to be guilty. It was no secret that there was much discussion surrounding the idea of the deserving poor and those who were undeserving during the period, to the point of Dickens needing to clarify his stance on the Poor Law. Schaffer rightly explains that Betty had reverted to peddling her knitted wares in a landscape that no longer had a place for her in the traditional squares and marketplaces (Schaffer 129). This return to traditional means of selling her wares rather than embracing the industrial shift left her without space to support herself as well as she needed. Despite this exclusion, she was propelled by her imagined position as a suspected Murderess, which ultimately helps her to continue moving until she is in a safe place where she can die. At the paper mill, the site of her death, she has regained her power since she has no risk of being buried on anyone else's terms but her own. She has made a connection to Lizzie, who she believes will carry out her last wishes, and she is finally at peace. Interestingly, however, it is not the realm of her visions that Betty looks to at the end of her life, but the caring face of Lizzie, who serves as an aid to assist her as she passes from a life of suffering to one of freedom: "A look of thankfulness and triumph lights the old, worn face. The eyes, which have been darkly fixed upon the sky, turn with meaning in them towards the compassionate face

from which the tears were dropping...” (Dickens 506). This triumphant look before the end of her life exposes the monstrosity of the society that put her in this dejected position; she had finally regained the power that was stripped from her with poverty and want and knew that she would have the death she wanted. Tellingly, in this scene, Lizzie is the one who lifts her head to heaven upon her death--one woman who is endowed with the gift of telling fortunes brings Betty back to the earthly realm long enough to peacefully end her visions before death.

Obscured Visions: Male Counterparts Hovering between Life and Death

In terms of access to this fantasy world, Dickens establishes a hierarchy with working-class women in the text with the power to change their position and circumstances for themselves and others. The fantasies and visions they participate in are more whimsical and of their own creation. Their male counterparts, however, are only able to access this realm when hovering between life and death, and never have control over the outcome for their own lives or those of others. Interestingly, the reader is only allowed glimpses into the liminal space between the natural and supernatural realms when these male characters briefly access it, and the reader is never allowed into the moment and specific imaginings of the visions they experience. They are instead detailed by those around them, particularly working-class females, or the narrator. In the case of Rogue Riderhood, while a community works to save him, it is daughter's hope for the person he could be after returning from death that rises to the surface after his near drowning; however, upon his waking, her hopes are dashed. As she diligently assists the doctor and the community of helpers who have tasked themselves with saving Rogue's

life, she uses what Dickens coins as her “natural woman’s aptitude” to anticipate their need of tools and aid (Dickens 441). This natural woman’s aptitude appears to extend to hazy, vague ideas and sweet delusions of what could happen if he was redeemed by this near-death experience: “Some hazy idea that if affairs could remain thus for a long time, it would be a respectable change, floats in her mind. Also some vague idea that the old evil is drowned out of him, and that if he should happily come back to resume his occupation of the empty form that lies upon the bed, his spirit will be altered” (Dickens 441). Significantly, the power of interpreting his time between realms of life and death is achieved by a working-class woman, Pleasant Riderhood. This vision she has for her father is one of redemption and cleansing, but not through the flames this time, but the ability of the river to support life (as was the case with Lizzie) or to bring life to an end by its envelopment. For the doctors and community members in the room striving to save Rogue, their involvement is due to the idea of preserving the spark of life that is traveling to this other realm, despite their distaste for Rogue himself: “No one has the least regard for the man; with them all he has been an object of avoidance, suspicion, and aversion; but the spark of life within him is curiously separable from himself now, and they have a deep interest in it, probably because it *is* life, and they are living and must die” (Dickens 439). Those striving to save him have a common interest in preserving the spark of life, but Pleasant has a deeper purpose for this effort and her vision—redemption for her father. It is, seemingly, Pleasant Riderhood’s will that brings him back to the living world, though the vision (delusion) she had for her father was, sadly, unfulfilled. Dickens even goes so far as to postulate on the will of the body to prefer death: “And yet—like us

all, when we swoon—like us all every day of our lives when we wake—he is instinctively unwilling to be restored to the consciousness of his existence, and would be left dormant, if he could” (Dickens 440). The act of shutting out the reader from Rogue’s impression of his time between life and death and instead placing the emphasis on his daughter’s vague idea/vision once again places power in the hands of women.

Although the outcome was less than desirable for Rogue Riderhood, Dickens situates Jenny in a position of power yet again as she serves as interpreter for Eugene Wrayburn while at death’s door. Eugene requested that she nurse him after asking her about her children and flowers from her visions; only she could understand the place of pain that he was in and interpret between one world and the next. Once again, she directs the action, and gives his companion Mortimer Lightwood the tools to rouse Eugene to consciousness over the course of her care:

... [She was] listening for any faint words that fell from him in his wanderings. It was amazing through how many hours at a time she would remain beside him, in a crouching attitude, attentive to his slightest moan...through this close watching (if though no secret sympathy or power) the little creature attained an understanding of him that Lightwood did not possess. Mortimer would often turn to her, as if she were an interpreter between this sentient world and the insensible man; and she would change the dressing of a wound, or ease a ligature, or turn his face, or alter the pressure of the bedclothes on him, with an absolute certainty of doing right. (Dickens 720)

Doubtless, caregiving has been a common trait for women of any class in literature, but in this instance, Jenny is not only performing the actions necessary at the sick bed, she is surpassing normal expectations. While Jenny Wren practices some traditional expectations for women such as caregiving, even in those roles, she disrupts the image of

the dutiful nurse or caregiver by asserting her agency and access to the “wandering world” of her visions, thereby setting her apart from traditional roles for women. Instead of being guided by patriarchal authority, she makes her own decisions for her life and only entertains the idea of marriage after she has achieved stability with her business and has the desire to consider the notion. Receiving the title of interpreter between this other world and the sentient world demonstrates her power—Mortimer, who has a far higher position in society is reliant on the interpretations of this girl and her attentive instructions. Lizzie, too, can rouse him back to consciousness from his lingering state, and once again, these two working-class women are able to produce an outcome that Eugene cannot for himself. He struggles to live, but it is their support and their calling him back to his present state that ultimately aids him in survival.

Conclusion: Visions and the Fate of Society

The close of *Our Mutual Friend* is aptly titled “The Voice of Society,” observant of how the novel began, with one vital difference: the voice of society has been altered by the absence of Eugene Wrayburn and the changed mindset of Mortimer Lightwood. At a table with England’s most elite dinner companions present, these absences are significant in terms of a broader possibility for change and social connection across classes. While Wrayburn is shunned by those discussing him over their meal for his marriage to Lizzie, and there is talk of his banishment from society, he has created a new life for himself and Lizzie, leaving the ruination of “polite” society behind him. Lightwood still occupies a space in this arena, but he has discovered what the others have been excluded from, the observation that the working-class, particularly the women, have an untold and

unrecognized power. His part in the voice of society will be forever changed, and perhaps, for Dickens, that is the point. It takes one powerful voice to enact change amidst the deafening noise of tinkling glasses and the latest social gossip.

While the visions of Lizzie, Jenny, and Betty Hidgen all result in desired outcomes for them, those of their counterparts typically end in calamity, with few exceptions. Dickens was most certainly aware of the problematic nature of keeping up appearances. The narrative that the working-classes on the margins were out of control was supported by the characters in the novel that were in the highest positions of society. Endowing these women with fantasy and visions allows them the social mobility that cannot be qualified by traditional societal standards; they are not necessarily moving to a higher class (although Lizzie and Jenny do eventually end up more secure) but have access to a higher realm that they can manipulate. Giving these working-class women powerful positions that men cannot access sends a persuasive message to middle class readers as a precursor to advancements for women, but it also does the important work of exposing the monstrosity of society to the common reader in hopes that action will be taken. These women demonstrated narrative power that shaped their personal circumstances and those of others, thus expanding expectations for gender and class. In my next chapter, I investigate women who move away from expectations in terms of virtuous labor. Dickens, through his scrupulous attention to detail, crafted a world in which women could create fantasies that became realities for themselves, and called into question the society that attempted to hold them captive, powerless, and invisible in the first place.

CHAPTER V

THE CHANGING FACE OF VIRTUE: WORKING CLASS WOMEN IN *A CITY GIRL*

Beginning with a study of a languid July afternoon in the Charlotte Buildings⁷⁴, home to the working classes, the relationship between women and expectations of virtue is already established in Margaret Harkness's first published novel *A City Girl: A Realistic Story* (1887). The oppressive heat has made the tight quarters of the buildings even more undesirable, and a palpable struggle to engage in the necessary work of the day is present. However, the women are still in motion, performing their domestic and work duties: "A mother sallied forth to call in her progeny, to scold a girl or cuff a boy...owing to the sultry weather" (Harkness 41). The women rent collectors perform their work and collect their dues despite the curiosity and criticism of the tenants. The tension between domestic virtue and progressive women is demonstrated in this first glimpse of the dynamics of the Charlotte buildings. The novel is Harkness's initial push against the Victorian virtues of domesticity and marriageability—the tenants discuss the marriageability of the women rent collectors while mothers perform their duties of parenting and domestic tasks. Harkness critiques these virtues by presenting no ideal marriage for the main character Nelly, but rather the promise of an unfulfilling one that requires self-denial. Additionally, Harkness emphasizes a contrast between middle-class

⁷⁴ As Sparks notes, the Charlotte Buildings are based on the Katharine buildings of the East End of London, which Harkness voluntarily stayed in for a short period (19).

domesticity with a conventional family at the hearth and Nelly's unconventional domestic space with a female roommate, caring for her infant son until his early death. In my last chapter, I carefully examined women's labor of visions and fantasy in *Our Mutual Friend*, and in this chapter, I explore women's virtuous labor, both unconventional in terms of focus. Patricia Johnson asserts that, "After the turbulent debates of the 1840s, working-class women largely disappear from public discourse in the 1850s. The emerging consensus among upper- and middle-class spectators and the male-dominated union movement was that working-class women should be returned to the domestic sphere. The newly-domesticated image of working-class women was not without its price, however" (133). The price of this image was a dear one and determined by those outside the working-class. Consequentially, not meeting these expectations came with a harsher critique and isolation for those in the working-class, particularly women. By examining the ways in which virtue is portrayed in Harkness's 1887 novel *A City Girl*, I argue that the representation of the working-class character Nelly challenges expectations of virtuous women in terms of marriage and domesticity, as well as critiquing the idea that a woman is/can be restored to virtue through marriage. Few critics have written on this text given its obscurity, and this chapter primarily engages with Tabitha Sparks and Sally Ledger, who consider Nelly's significance in the novel.⁷⁵ This rejection of traditional virtue and critique of marriage revises our critical understanding of women during the late Victorian period.

⁷⁵ *A City Girl* is an obscure text with only one critical edition that was released in 2017. As a result, there is a dearth of scholarship on this piece. I have excluded the two critical texts that deal with socialism in the novel as it is not relevant for my research in this chapter.

Set in London's East End in the 1880's, *A City Girl* takes place in the slums with a particular focus on the working-class community. Nelly Ambrose, the main character, is a sweated trouser maker who dreams of a fashionable and leisurely life. After meeting a wealthy bureaucrat and intellectual named Arthur, she is seduced and becomes pregnant with his child. This results in the loss of her job and the total rejection of her family. George, the landlord of the slums, decides to help her by putting her in contact with the Salvation Army, an entity that provides housing and support for women who are considered "fallen." Nelly secures a female roommate and creates her own trouser making business that she runs out of their home. She gives birth to her son, who unfortunately lives for only a short time. *A City Girl* deviates from many Victorian novels in its sympathetic portrayal of Nelly and her independence for the majority of the novel. Through this novel, Harkness provides a nuanced presentation of the working-class, particularly women, along with a distinct social critique of marriage and what is considered virtuous for the late Victorian woman.

London's East End in the 1880s: Slums, Sexuality, and Deviant Women

In the late Victorian period, the East End of London was associated with poverty, violence, and danger, particularly for women. The year following *A City Girl's* 1887 publication was the beginning of the notorious Jack the Ripper murders, which put the East End in the international public eye. In the 1880s, the East End was home to working women, but the call to return to domesticity from the middle-class⁷⁶ was challenged by

⁷⁶ These expectations can be traced back to the 1842 parliamentary reports on women and children in mines and collieries.

the very state of the living quarters of the working-class. The legitimacy of homes themselves were called into question by critics of the time. In 1883 Andrew Mearns argued: “how can those places be called homes, compared with which the lair of a wild beast would be a comfortable and healthy spot?” (3). Harkness’s choice to set her novel in the East End of London was informed by her own experience following her time living in the Katharine Buildings. This choice of setting is subversive given the transience and instability of late 1800s working class culture. In this space where workers were living in desperate tight quarters, she places her character Nelly, who is not only thriving with a regular income, but supporting her mother and brother as well. While she is by no means wealthy, she has stable work and plenty of it, in contrast to the fluctuating and sometimes fraught nature of work during the time period. In east London the casual labor markets were booming with people ready and willing to take any work opportunity available.

These sweated trades were more reliable than other industries, as John Marriott argues:

Many found their way into one of the sweated trades, which were weathering the storms from provincial and foreign competition, in part because of the abundant supplies of cheap labor they could exploit...perspectives of the East London economy in this period were dominated by images of tailoring, footwear and furniture, popularly understood to be at the core of the sweating system. (211)

Middle-class readers in the 1880s were held captive by stories of the East End of London-- a hub for the working poor and exactly the sort of place that symbolized the degeneration of virtue. For middle-class women in particular this space called for sympathy, influence, and personal involvement. Several middle-class writers, including Harkness and her cousin Beatrice Potter Webb, lived briefly in these buildings in the East

End and served as missionaries or community servants. These terms suggest vastly different conceptions of this work—missionary work is completed in areas outside of the immediate community and community servants serve local and global communities. Clare Midgley establishes women’s delayed entry into national committees for foreign mission efforts: “Women, however, were excluded from the national committees of these foreign missionary societies until the late nineteenth century or even later, and it was not until the period between 1858 and 1887 that the societies began to recruit women as missionaries in their own right” (337-338).⁷⁷ Despite this exclusion from foreign missions for a time, women were actively contributing to local community service in the most vulnerable areas. Community service to the local slum communities was provided by women, as Jill Rappoport contends:

A group of Salvation Army workers known as “Slum Sisters” began to live and work among London’s East End paupers. As members of an evangelical Christian reform organization, Slum Sisters ministered to the poor, stressed conversion of body and soul, and tried to improve sanitary conditions in slum dwellings. Like investigative journalists too, they often dressed incognito, disguising themselves to enter and shed light on the dark spaces of the slums. (2)

This incognito effort to minister to the poor operated alongside those who sought to influence or observe/study those in the working class. Gabrielle Mearns rightly asserts that middle-class women increasingly visited the East End for the purposes of “feminine purity and ‘influence’, and an increasingly prevalent discourse of the fin de siècle that emphasized ‘scientific’ observation of working-class life...” (2). As Paul Newland

⁷⁷ Midgley notes that the major national missionary societies made a formal decision to directly recruit women on these respective dates: Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society in 1858, Baptist Missionary Society in 1866, London Missionary Society in 1875, and Church Missionary Society in 1887 (338).

articulates, “The East End of London has certainly been traditionally understood to be a space of the working classes...the East End of London has also been seen to operate as a manifestation of middle-class anxieties concerning the possible rise of these working classes” (20). What makes Harkness’s novel unique is its reversal of this dangerousness—only when Nelly ventures outside of the East End is she in danger. It is a familiar trope that middle-class/white people view urban lower-class neighborhoods as more dangerous than their affluent ones for inhabitants, but outside the Buildings and the East End she is seduced and then later robbed of her purse and mistaken for a prostitute. Although she is not one, she can get no help from the police. The policeman assumes she is drunk; instead a kind passerby aids her in getting safe passage back to her home in Whitechapel on a bitter cold and wintry night (Harkness 86). The West End held more danger for her than Whitechapel ever could and here she realizes she will never have the affection, love, and support she desired from romantic love. Here in the West End she is nearly left to die on the street with no aid and in Whitechapel she receives help. Harkness exposes the cracks in the domestic landscape for women and presents a scenario in which the alternative lifestyle of single womanhood and motherhood is fulfilling rather than dire for “fallen” women.

These assumptions and attitudes about the East End of London, even following the publication of *A City Girl*, were still critical of those who lived there and ultimately continued to reinforce a hierarchy between classes. In his landmark book *From the Abyss*, Charles Masterman critiques the working-class:

Our streets have suddenly become congested with a weird and uncanny people. They have poured in as dense black masses from the eastern railways; they have streamed across the bridges from the marshes and desolate places beyond the river; they have been hurried up in incredible number through the tubes sunk in the bowels of the earth, emerging like rats from a drain, blinking in the sunshine. (241).

This comparison to rats coming up from a drain maintains assumptions about the East End that were so damaging and neglectful of the potential richness within. An effort to modify the East End in the late nineteenth century was meant to cleanse the area by adding open green spaces rather than emphasizing the limited and crowded confines of the buildings.⁷⁸ However, even this effort of cleansing could not keep the ideas of uncleanliness and lack of virtue from being attached to the East End.

The Virtue of Portraying the Truth: Slum Realistic Fiction

While other chapters have addressed the Condition of England novels *Mary Barton* and *Our Mutual Friend*, and the working-class fictional novel *That Lass O'Lowrie's*,⁷⁹ *A City Girl* is an extension of these kinds of novels through the venue of what I call slum realistic fiction. The genre of this novel has been a point of critical contention.⁸⁰ Whereas other slum fiction novels represented a middle-class character that visits and contributes to charitable efforts in slum communities, *A City Girl* is unique due to the combination of the removed third-person narrator and that of Nelly, the working-

⁷⁸ For more information, see Brown's article on the repurposing of disused burial grounds and cemeteries in East London to form gardens and playgrounds during the 1880s through the end of the nineteenth century.

⁷⁹ *That Lass O'Lowrie's* has been broadly, in my opinion, mis-labeled as a romance novel, but has otherwise not been classified in a specific movement or genre other than fictional novel. This is likely due to the lack of critical attention the novel has had in the literary studies field.

⁸⁰ As Sparks notes, the novel has been considered a naturalist novel, slum fiction, realistic novel, sociological novel, and New Woman novel, among other categories (21-24).

class city girl of the title. While several reviewers took issue with its description as a realist novel, it does contain realism without the “uncensored exploration of social crisis like alcoholism or prostitution,” as Sparks contends (25). While critics have contested, and I agree, that this novel does not fulfill the expectations of a New Woman novel, the character Nelly makes significant departures from expectations for women in terms of domesticity and marriage. In her book on the Victorian New Woman, Ledger shares her critique of Nelly: “With such a diverse panorama of London’s womanhood at her disposal, it is intriguing that Margaret Harkness should have selected Nelly Ambrose as her generic ‘City Girl.’ Nelly is an emphatically unexceptional girl” (45). While Nelly does not have the depth⁸¹ that some central women characters have in other novels she is in keeping with the realistic genre. This move is significant due to her voice narrating parts of the novel, placing her in a more prominent position than the benevolent stranger who visits the slums due to her class. This character is realistic and noteworthy precisely because, as Sparks attests:

It is also possible to see [her flatness] at the heart of her critique of poverty. That Nelly lacks a rich inner life and a scope for self-direction, after all, can extend logically from the cruel and hapless world she lives in. Where amidst the violence, exploitation, and primitive conditions of the Buildings might Nelly develop subjective depth or plan for an alternative future? In her brief romance with Arthur, the outlines of a world of comfort and natural beauty start to emerge, but the events that follow seem, again logically, to shut this vista down altogether. (29)

⁸¹ For example, Alice from *Mary Barton* (1848), who I examine in chapter two of this project, has considerable depth in the novel. Her motivations for healing labor are revealed as well as her sacrifices to perform the work, she is provided with a backstory beyond the direct action of the text and has emotional complexity. By contrast, Nelly’s motivations are not revealed beyond a desire to be stylish; readers are left to wonder about her backstory or social history with her immediate family and community beyond a few references, and her emotional complexity is only occasionally breached in the text.

Indeed, a world of comfort and natural beauty seems out of reach for Nelly; however, I extend Sparks' claim by arguing that what she lacks in subjective depth she makes up for with her plan for an alternative future following the birth of her son, though the plan is never fully realized. I agree with Sparks' argument that the presentation of Nelly is a critique of poverty; that the demands of her work as well as the violence, exploitation, and primitive conditions she experiences prevent her from ever achieving an alternative future. This is what establishes the novel as slum realistic fiction: she is unable to escape her work long enough to fully form plans for a future or later to process her grief following the loss of her son. Despite this disenfranchisement, however, her imaginings of a life of leisure always remove her from the domestic space, work, and the conventions imposed upon her in terms of marriage and domesticity.

Imaginings Away from Home: Virtue and the River

On the cusp of the New Woman movement in which women were broadening their scope beyond the home into political involvement,⁸² Nelly's imaginings drastically depart from the image of the domestic working-class woman. While Nelly is widely considered a flat character with little depth, she suggests a significant shift from the idealized woman's place at the family hearth. The first imagining readers encounter is Nelly's dream of being a stylish woman: "Her mind was completely occupied by the fact that she was going to buy a new feather for her Sunday hat. Should the feather be red or

⁸² Helen Rogers establishes that political involvement was increasing and, to some degree, dependent on access to resources and "...conditioned, and often limited, by the demands on their time and labor as wives, mothers, and workers; by the attitudes of male relatives and employers; and by the roles and resources that were allocated to them by political movements" (24).

blue? Blue suited her best, but red looked the smartest. She had but one ambition in dress, that was to wear something ‘stylish’” (Harkness 46). Cultural expectations for working-class women at the time were a return to domesticity with a focus on being in the home, and along with it, humility and femininity. The characters in the novel in her direct community support the idea of upholding domesticity as well--however, Nelly demonstrates a desire to flee the home rather than cling to it, and to stand out among the crowd rather than blend in. This desire to be stylish is one of the ways in which Nelly resists the expectations for women during the period, especially in the working-class—in this scene she is providing herself with the means to be stylish. While it could confirm an image of working-class women as irresponsible and excessively concerned with appearance, I argue that this effort to be stylish is a way of resisting a system of labor that perpetuates the inability to spend money on wants rather than necessities. This sole ambition is meaningful in that she is able to imagine being stylish; despite the constant demands of her time, she is left with time to dream of a different sort of life. Sparks rightly notes that, “The working girl donning a feather in her hat or hair is a prevalent image in Victorian London. The feather could indicate frivolity or, worse, pleasure seeking” (8). Mill girls and shop girls were particularly known for using money to buy finery, which were associated with promiscuity and shallow values. For Nelly, donning the feather is her way of separating herself from her work life and making her dress convey her dream of being a stylish lady. She imagines being a pristine lady untainted by work:

“To look like a lady,” she called it; and the sort of lady she admired was the only lady with whom she had ever come in contact...To sit on a sofa, to read a novelette, to sip coffee with a teaspoon, to have someone put on and take off her boots, was her idea of being a lady...To mimic this blissful state she strove her uttermost, during the odd minutes she had to spare, and with the few pence she could save from the housekeeping. (Harkness 46)

Her mimicry of her idea of being a lady demonstrates work entirely replaced by leisure, however, significantly, a hierarchy of labor is established—she has a worker to save her from even the labor of removing her boots.

The domestic and marriage expectations for working women is once again diverted in Nelly’s imagining when Arthur asks her to take a row on the river. This daydream takes her away from home and the possibility of marriage: “She hesitated, then said “Yes”—for her thoughts conjured up a picture in which she saw herself far away from the Buildings and work; out of doors, in the sunshine, enjoying herself. She promised to meet him in the Kew Pier that day week...” (Harkness 71). While she is agreeing to this meeting on the river the imagining she conjures does not include her lover Arthur, but only herself enjoying leisure. This isolation is noteworthy because women during the period were expected to dream of being married and mothers, not enjoying life with no domestic responsibilities. According to Ginger Frost, “The Victorian middle class had an ideology of family life, called domesticity, that saw women as especially suited to the private sphere. Given their “natural” proclivities, respectable women devoted themselves to their homes, husbands, and children” (23). Frost acknowledges that the working-class could not follow every aspect of domesticity, but

the middle classes were culturally influential and thus, some ideas fit with laborers and gained traction in these communities:

Most poor people did not want wives and children to have to work long hours to survive; they preferred the “breadwinner wage,” where adult men earned enough to support their families. The ideas of domesticity offered them a way to convince the middle classes to raise wages and limit hours of dependents, as the middle class could hardly argue against its own ideology, try though it might. Children continued to work for wages (mostly part time) in the late Victorian period, but working-class mothers did so less often. (24)

In contrast to these established underpinnings of domesticity, Nelly imagines a life away from work, motherhood, and ultimately, alone. Her dream of being far away from the Buildings and working in the sunshine is significant in that she is not participating in any of the constant work that has plagued her previously and she is ultimately outside of the home. The buildings were cramped, dark, and suffocating in the descriptions in the text, but in this imagining, she escapes to a more natural world, similar to Ruskin’s ideal. Access to nature and leisure are linked with class,⁸³ and for a brief moment, she is no longer the primary provider for her mother and unemployed brother and is partaking in an excursion without the criticism of her family. Away from the buildings and her community, she would not have the constant pressures of work and poverty.

This escape from work and pressure provides Nelly with what she names Paradise; a land of leisure:

As Nelly sat there eating cake, and listening to the music, she felt in Paradise; work and trouble were forgotten in the joys of the present; sweaters and trousers

⁸³ For instance, Gaskell’s *Mary Barton* opens with the working-class characters strolling through the fields outside of Manchester, which was an infrequent occurrence.

became things of the past; mother and brother were changed into fond relations; her companions were no longer George, Jack, and Mr. Grant, but the handsomest, the best, the kindest men on the face of the earth. (Harkness 60)

The men in this imagining become unknown and idealized, and even Arthur Grant, despite his higher station, is grouped in with these ambiguous male figures. Following her abandonment by Arthur, Nelly's imaginings stop altogether for a time and she loses her desire to ever go anywhere but to church, home, and market. Each of these locations require her to perform virtues expected of her by her immediate family as well as society. She is expected to sacrifice income and remain dedicated to the church even though she has so little. She is expected to work while in her home and provide for her family when she goes to market. She is relentless in her pursuit of work, much to the satisfaction of her dependents, her mother and brother: "Her machine was scarcely ever silent, and often it was heard until late in the night. The girl bent over the long rows of stitches with pale, tired face, taking no notice of what went on around her, refusing to go anywhere but to church and market" (Harkness 81). The loss of her imaginings and unwillingness to go on holiday to escape the buildings is telling—she is returning to the time-honored virtue of being the selfless female provider for her household, heard only through the sound of her work and no longer through her voice or insistence on taking holiday. This is her time of preparation for what she knows is coming—her rejection is a result of an unplanned pregnancy, which is not revealed openly until later in the novel. Her once consuming desires to be stylish and live a life of leisure have diminished, and along with it, her ability to imagine a life that is not her own.

Class divides are consistently linked with the virtue of domesticity for Victorian women; what was possible for women of a higher class in terms of being the Angel in the House was not as easily possible for working-class women, especially unwed mothers like Nelly. An emphasis on domesticity was present for working-class women during the Victorian period according to Charles Masters:

From the early Victorian period onwards respectability was bound up with a certain model of domesticity...the emphases was on the Christian and virtuous home with the mother as the 'angel of the house' and the prime moral tutor of the young...the fact that domestic service was a key occupation for working-class girls throughout the period strengthens the contention that evidence of working-class domesticity—where it can be shown to exist—marked a form of 'cultural osmosis' or cultural incorporation of a member of the working class by the middle class. (124-125)⁸⁴

Despite her efforts, Nelly was never able to incorporate herself into another class. Nelly's imaginings of escape turn to realizations that the gap between the rich and the poor is impenetrable. Following her observation of Arthur at home with the ideal family at the hearth, Nelly reflects on their distance from one another in physical, familial, and economic terms. Arthur's wife has all the comforts of home provided for her by her social position and her husband's income, while Nelly has to be self-reliant. He was in the comfort of his warm home with his wife and three children while Nelly was in the cold observing his life from the window. Here she was only allowed a glimpse of private domestic life in the West End:

⁸⁴ Masters establishes that even as late as the 1920s this emphasis on domesticity was still prevalent: "At Bedern School in the 1920s, the emphasis was still on girls being 'taught the basics of learning how to keep house,' the implication being that mothers were failing in their duty to do so, either through neglect or sheer incompetence" (124).

Most of the houses had the shutters up or the blinds down, only a few remained open to view. She came to the end of the road, crossed over and walked up it on the other side, halting as before at each uncovered window to continue her scrutiny. Her face was very pale; her hazel eyes looked careworn and anxious. Suddenly she gave a start, drew in her breath, and stopped short in front of a bow window...she leant forward, and into her eyes came a hungry look; while she watched her face grew older. Then the door of a room was opened and a lady walked in, carrying a baby, which she placed on the gentleman's knee. She laid her hand on his shoulder and stood watching the children with a smile upon her face and her hands folded across her wrapper... (Harkness 83-84)

In this scene Nelly is displaced from the domestic space, in contrast with what she has seen inside Arthur's home. This privacy that she encounters initially with shutters up and blinds down is a privilege she was unable to have in the Buildings, where space was cramped and where her individual space was constantly invaded by her immediate family. However, this idyllic domestic scene is punctuated by Arthur's restlessness and he eventually gazes out the window. Once again, Harkness indicates the cracks in domestic life—this family and his wife were not enough to fulfill him and his wife believes the illusion he creates for her. While Arthur's wife is warm by the fire in her wrapper surrounded by her family and husband, Nelly is in the cold street pregnant with Arthur's unborn child.

For a character that is regarded as lacking depth, Nelly is certainly reflective of the distance between the East and West End and their inability to ever make contact for long or ever in a sustainable way: "She sat down on a doorstep, and sitting there she felt how far, how very far the East is from the West. She realized that Whitechapel may talk to Kensington, and Kensington may shake hands with Whitechapel, but between them there is a great gulf fixed, the thought of which made her head ache and her heart sink"

(Harkness 85).⁸⁵ This realization takes into account the larger social context of East versus West. As Drew Gray asserts, the East and West contrasts had a long history and the East End was historically associated with dirty trades (62).⁸⁶ Sweated seamstresses such as Nelly had no regulations and protections, leaving them more at risk, according to Shelia Blackburn:

Although Victorians in the 1840s were prepared to countenance regulation to regulate the hours and working conditions of children and women in factories, they could not, despite public sympathy for the distressed seamstress, bring themselves to sanction control or inspections of work carried out by adults in the sanctity of the home. Such surveillance, it was argued, would drive women out of their dwelling into the moral danger of the marketplace...Impropriety would occur if male inspectors (no females were appointed until 1893) were allowed access to the bedrooms of sweated females. (245)

This lack of regulation and inspection made this trade all the more questionable and the gap between the East and West end more prominent. Deborah Morse asserts that, "The human cost of Victorian class-and-money defined demands for elaborate clothing on short notice, a demand met through the virtual slave labor of the seamstress" (30).⁸⁷ Nelly's newfound maturity is shown through her recognition of these divides and the ceasing of her imaginings. She realizes that her brief experience of the comforts of the West End were an illusion and the gulf between the classes is unchanging after all. The

⁸⁵ Sparks notes that this is a reference to Luke 16:26: "And besides all this, between us and you there is a great gulf, so that those who would pass from here to you cannot, nor can those from there pass to us" (Harkness 85).

⁸⁶ Gray addresses the fact that this idea of East Enders as in the dirty trades was the result of demarcations that were made during Saxon times and argues that, "...the East End had a diverse culture with many places of worship, entertainment and trade, and a long history" (63).

⁸⁷ Morse pays particular attention to the depiction of seamstresses in major novels of the period, such as Gaskell's *Mary Barton* and *Ruth* (33).

loss of these imaginings directly coincides with the consequences of her one foray into romantic love and a world very unlike her own. She buries herself in work and does not acknowledge her pregnancy until just before the birth of her son. Her imaginings return only with his birth. She imagines that he will have only the best clothes: “She had dreams of clothes her machine would make bye-and bye; of wonderful little cloaks and dresses her fingers would stitch” (Harkness 99). This description of her changed imaginings indicates a newfound independence—instead of imagining a life free of labor away from the buildings, here she has the agency to bring her dreams of stylish clothes to fruition for her son. Her work is not for some unknown other or a sweater, but all for the benefit of her own working-class family.⁸⁸ Her attention to detail and perfectionism in her craft would result in finery for her own child rather than those of a different class above her. She is no longer dreaming of a leisurely life or romance; now her work has value because she chooses it for herself as a means to provide a more sustainable life for herself and her son.

Needlework: A Reflection of the Virtue of Humanity

Like of the Condition of England novels that came before it, *A City Girl* uses the character of Nelly as needlewoman as a representative of the working-class. As Lynn Mae Alexander argues, “by choosing a woman to represent the suffering of the working classes, an author was more likely to strike a sympathetic note with the audience” (1). Women were viewed during the period as less powerful and capable, but from the

⁸⁸ Much like Marx’s theory of labor establishes, Nelly is unable to provide beyond necessities for herself through her labor.

beginning of the text, Nelly is providing for herself and others. Like Dickens before her, part of Harkness's activism lies in her choice to portray her main character as not entirely vulnerable to her circumstances. Nelly did not become a prostitute, but instead embraced her son and her expulsion from her lifelong community. While George aided her in the initial steps of making a connection to the Salvation Army and assisted by paying for her lodging, once on her feet she is working round the clock once more and unattached to him or anyone else. Part of what makes the use of a needlewoman as the main character successful is the sheer prominence of needlewomen in Victorian culture and the intrinsic class commentary associated with these images. As Helena Mitchie argues:

The seamstress's body was depicted everywhere, in poems, articles, engravings, and wall paintings. The solitary, pathetic figure appeared on the walls of fine houses and prestigious art galleries...One *Punch* cartoon, entitled, "The Haunted Lady of 'The Ghost' in the Looking Glass," depicts a young lady looking in a mirror at the vision of herself in a new gown, only to see the dead figure of the young woman who presumably made the dress gazing back at her. The two women look strangely alike; the dead seamstress is merely this young lady "undressed" of her finery and her class position. Like the governess, the seamstress seems at times to inhabit the body of a young lady or to *be* the body that is dressed and hidden. (56)

Middle-class readers were already exposed to these immersive images and depictions of the seamstress, and Nelly as the main character of this text was another way for readers to engage with this figure. Like the *Punch* cartoon, Nelly shares many of the same desires as her female readership, though undressed of a higher-class position—the desire for romance, luxury, travel, and finery, despite her role in producing clothes. Alexander notes that the attitude towards needlewomen can be used as a measure of the culture's attitude toward humanity in general (1). The treatment that Nelly receives at the hands of

those who in powerful positions over her paints a poor picture of humanity. When she is at her most vulnerable and her pregnancy starts to show, her meticulousness and perfectionism that go into producing her high-quality work becomes irrelevant. She is cast out of her work where she had performed exceptionally, and then subsequently abused and turned out of her home in the Buildings. Before her pregnancy, her boss the sweater's wife acknowledged her as her best worker and treated her accordingly:

Of all the hands she liked Nelly the best. She was sure to have the work well done if she entrusted it to Nelly Ambrose, and no saucy answer if she happened to be in a bad temper when the girl brought it home. She kept Nelly waiting sometimes, she haggled and scolded; but she gave the girl regular work and good wages. And all this she did because her best hand would have found work elsewhere had she acted differently. (Harkness 66)

Her exceptional performance not only garnered her respect from her boss but gave her options for other work if she decided to leave and go elsewhere. This respect was in response to Nelly's quality of work, her patience in receiving work, and her respectful attitude when given directions. When her pregnancy is discovered, she is turned out by her boss and no longer has other options for employment in the surrounding sweated shops: "Then the sweater's wife gave vent to her feelings. She called Nelly by the most terrible names that have ever been invented; no term in the feminine vocabulary seemed to her bad enough for the poor hand who trembled before her...each sweater told her that he had no need of her services" (Harkness 87). Significantly, the sweater's wife presents the kind of virtuous woman that would have had approval from Victorian society; she is married and seemingly domestic. The sweater's wife represents a more traditional idea of virtue with all the cruel underpinnings, but Nelly practices a more gracious and virtuous

existence despite her exile. Harkness directly critiques this idea of the virtuous woman through her narrator's commentary on the sweater's wife: "There is nothing in this world so hard, so cold, as a woman who prides herself upon being virtuous; no one so barren of comfort as a wife who has no temptation to leave the path of righteousness" (Harkness 88). This shaming and exclusion occurs in her community as well. She is shunned by church members, priests, and the community she had befriended and forged relationships with following the discovery of her pregnancy. In so many ways, however, the loss of this community and work allows her to start fresh with a more progressive community that is not reliant on her income for near-total support. If the treatment of Nelly is to reflect the treatment of humanity in general, then the cracks and inadequacies of Victorian society are certainly present. She is treated best by those who did not know her and chose to help her when no one else would—those in the Salvation Army, and most directly, another woman.⁸⁹

Likewise, Mitchie asserts the importance of needlewomen and argues that they "occupied so central a space in the Victorian conscience" (56). The labor of needlewomen was the backbone of the clothing trades and made it possible for the middle and upper classes to access the stylish world Nelly dreamed of in the text. To understand the significance of placing a sweated labor needlewoman as the main character of the novel, we must first realize that Harkness was certainly maintaining expectations for the

⁸⁹ Harkness had a complicated relationship with the Salvation Army, but applauded their work with fallen women in particular, as Sparks notes: "Harkness endorses in her novels and non-fiction the Salvation Army's practical aid to the homeless, hungry, and unsupported, but the organization does not escape her critique" (18-19).

realistic novel genre through this choice. What Nelly lacks in depth of character she makes up for in terms of her representation of, arguably, one of the most vulnerable sections of the working-class. Needlewomen occupied a critical position in Victorian fiction as well, as Morse points out: “Ill-fed, cold, overworked, and lacking affectionate guardianship, the needlewoman, as several ‘social problem’ novels depict her, was often in fact a fallen woman” (27). Nelly is no exception to this fallen status, and her troubles begin when her pregnancy becomes visible. At this point she endures the worst of humanity’s rejection, but she is able to survive with the kindness of George and the Salvation Army coupled with her own choices.

Needlewomen were frequently portrayed as representatives of the working classes in literary and artistic works/texts. The ills endured by these needlewomen outlined a prominent issue in the Victorian period. Blackburn provides a comprehensive study of needlewomen participating in sweated labor, and asserts that sweated home needlewomen were at the core of these social problems:

Sweated labor was defined in 1890 by a House of Lords Select Committee on the Sweating system (SCSS) as long hours, unsanitary working conditions, and unduly low wages—with the accent falling on ‘earnings...barely sufficient to sustain existence.’ The issue formed one of the most intractable social problems of the Victorian and Edwardian eras. For most of that time, sweating was particularly associated with needlewomen—especially those who worked at home. (243)

This intractable problem was completely at odds with expectations for women in terms of domesticity—how could working women maintain all of their domestic obligations when work required so much of their time and energy? Working women were criticized for

abandoning motherhood by sending their children to be cared for by others so they could work, but here is another place where the character of Nelly is deviant—she keeps her child by her side and even leaves her work for a short time when he falls ill to make sure she tries to get him the best possible care. Blackburn further notes that both Karl Marx in 1867 and later the SCSS in 1890 established that working-class life was rife with brutality and starvation deaths and noted that East End clothing production was particularly arduous (243). This context places Nelly at a stark contrast to most needlewomen portrayed in novels because her labor sets her apart—she is a favorite of the Sweater's Wife and is able to sustain herself and her mother and loafing brother, as he is described in the text. She is able to make it possible to take holidays, though infrequently, as she chooses. Nelly certainly struggles more with provisions for herself after her fallen status is discovered, and without the help of the Salvation Army she would have been unable to continue her work as a needlewoman. She fits the expectations for sweated labor in terms of the overwhelming amount of hours she is working. The only times in the novel she is not constantly working is when she is on her excursions outside of the Buildings on holiday and taking her son to the hospital, and both of these outings end in devastation. Following the discovery of her pregnancy, one of the male officers modeled her trousers and was able to get her work once all of the local possibilities were extinguished. However, following this assistance, she is largely self-sufficient for herself and her child and she is constantly working. Holidays became a thing of the past for her.

The labor market itself put sweated homeworking women at a significant disadvantage, but Nelly seems less exploited than the typical needlewomen of the period at this vulnerable juncture. Blackburn contends:

The majority of homeworkers, though, were chiefly deserted wives, widows, elderly spinsters, or poor married women whose husbands' wages were inadequate or too irregular to maintain the family. These needlewomen were forced to accept exploitative rates of pay because they suffered from two interrelated disadvantages in the labor market. First, freedom of access into the needle trades caused an oversupply of labor...Second, the women were unable to establish the collective as opposed to individual bargaining techniques to regulate the price of their labor...low pay defeated attempts to organize collectively. (244)

Nelly deviates from typical renderings of the fallen woman in the divergence of her ultimate outcome and her placement at the center of the novel's action. Her situation was unconventional in that she was able to find happiness and a home with another woman rather than in a marriage. Due to this outcome she is able to partially avoid, as Deborah Logan explains, "The literary tendency to "kill off" fallen women and their children, and...the cultural tendency to transport widows, spinsters, convicts, and any other woman who was not an angel in the house, serves as an apt metaphor for the period's desire to sweep inconvenient social anomalies under the carpet" (91). Nelly does not die and she is unwilling to be swept under the carpet. While her situation fits this expectation in terms of her child dying, she is unwilling to let his existence be forgotten. Rather than meekly accepting a life that is planned out for her by her future husband George with no memory of her child she still mentions him and refuses to speak of him with shame. Nonetheless, her inconvenient social truths have the potential to later be erased with the end of the novel and her move to the country with George following the death of her son, so she

does not fully escape the outcomes Logan outlines. She had accepted the chastisement and exclusion of her community and built a new one of her own. She achieved something like the warm home and welcoming hearth she observed in the West End when she went to find Arthur, but her home was shared with a female friend with no intention, at that point, to marry. This narrative is progressive for readers of the period who had been exposed to fallen women enduring the narrow fates of death, prostitution, or destitution. Nelly thriving, however briefly, as a fallen woman and single mother exposed readers to the possibility of a new and radical narrative for these women—they could be fulfilled and even joyful despite what is viewed as a fall from virtue.

As a character, Nelly successfully avoids the extreme outcome of prostitution that has so commonly been repeated in Victorian literature through such popular characters as Esther from *Mary Barton*. However, despite the seeming advantages of avoiding prostitution, by the end of the novel, Nelly is bereft of her independence, her earnings, and her child. According to Martha Vicinus, the outcome of prostitution was more secure than working in these sweated labors: “The standard of living was perceptively higher than other working women...[they] could earn the weekly wages of a respectable working woman in a day...had a room of their own; they dressed better; they had spending money and access to the pub” (76). Despite not being a sex worker, Nelly’s standard of living was most secure following the employment she was able to gain after the birth of her son. She had a room of her own that was shared with another woman and the flexibility to work around the clock at home while caring for her son, but she was no longer concerned with how she dressed or having additional money for being stylish. As

a character, she was unwilling to become anonymous due to the shame her community and society expected her to feel.

Respect in Place of Shame: Nelly and Redemptive Motherhood

Shame and fallen status went hand in hand in the Victorian age; however, Nelly once again deviates from this expectation with her newfound motherhood. Unwed mothers in particular were criticized openly and punished for what was viewed as their sexual deviance. When she is put out of work after her pregnancy is discovered by the cruel sweater's wife she does not beg her to return to work. After going back halfway and considering the idea she decides against it, which is her first growth of character in terms of the virtue of having more respect for herself: "[She had] heard that only 'honest' women should make trousers for virtuous sweaters, not girls like Nelly Ambrose....'No,' she thought, 'I will face Tom sooner than that dreadful woman. I will try to get work somewhere else. I will do anything'" (Harkness 88). While this scene can be interpreted as passivity, I argue that she is honing the virtue of respect for herself and moving away from the domestic expectation of shame for a pregnancy out of wedlock. This change in expected reaction is in keeping with Lorelee MacPike's claim that "fallen women's maternity transforms shame into redemption reveals that complicity with the maternal mystique to an extent compensates for sexual deviance" (qtd. Logan 110). Instead, she embraces the new community she has been able to create through the kindness of others and her hard work. She embraces redemption for herself by leaving harsh environments and those that used her for her work. Sparks indicates the consequences of the aim of social mobility and contends that,

At the same time when the New Women were imagining a world where public mobility would enable more freedom, responsibility, and ultimately respect, Nelly's case illustrates the intrinsically middle-class nature of these objectives. Where mobility for the middle-class woman was a form of resistance and progress, for Nelly it enables a fleeting romance that leads to a tragic consequence. (21)

Although Nelly does not fit the requirements laid out for New Women, she deviates from the domestic and marriage virtues that were still prominent for the working-class at the time since she refuses the traditional response after her "fall." While her social mobility does not advance in ways that would be desirable for the age, such as becoming more educated and domesticated, it changes in favorable ways for her preferences, demonstrating resistance and progress. Instead of returning home to her family when she gets an offer eventually she decides to stay with her Salvation Army⁹⁰ woman friend. Despite the stigma associated with having a child out of wedlock, she was providing her child with a life away from the buildings in a home that was always more supportive than the one she grew up in. Instead of being used for her labor and abused emotionally and physically, she chooses a healthier home environment for herself and her child. The ultimate consequence for her is the death of her child along with her independence, however. She does not though, like so many fallen women before her in Victorian texts, share the same fate of death due to prostitution. This newfound respect for herself was convergent with active motherhood for Nelly; she shaped her life around goals for herself and her son. Once her son Arthur dies prematurely, she no longer resists expectations or

⁹⁰ Pamela Walker establishes that the East End was "...the location of the permanent headquarters and the training ground for officers...the East End was among the most persistently difficult areas to evangelize for any reason" (176).

seems to have preferences about the direction her life should take. While she does not grow in respect from others in the text due to her fallen status, she makes significant progress in terms of her respect for herself, at least for a time, and pride in her son despite his illegitimacy.

Even though these areas of her growth have been overlooked by scholars and reviewers, they emerge as new virtues her character outlines for the time period. Nelly makes a break away from the expectation to raise her child in her original home with her immediate family, and this decision leaves her with the stain of shame that comes with raising her child on her own. This newfound respect for herself is evident in her refusal of her brother Tom's request once he and their mother were three months behind on rent. Initially, this newfound virtue of respect is evident in the way that she refuses to follow her brother Tom's orders:

He walked into the kitchen, and there he found Nelly nursing her baby...the loafer felt that somehow or other a change had come over his sister...
'Put down that brat while I talk to yer,' said Tom, 'I've summnt to say Nelly.'
Instead of putting down the baby Nelly only held it closer. She rocked it in her arms while she waited for Tom to go on speaking, and held its tiny head to her face, kissing it. (Harkness 99)

In this scene, Nelly's respect for herself is clear through her actions—she is unwilling to follow his orders as she would have so easily before. As an act of resistance, she holds her baby closer and covers him in adoring kisses, much to the chagrin of her brother. This act of respecting herself and lavishing her son with affection despite the critique her brother has for her and her child is a deviation from the expectation of shame. It is a show of respecting her own decisions rather than those made for her. At this point in the novel,

Nelly is her most independent and capable; she resists returning to an abusive household and the buildings and is determined to make a better life for herself and her child. She changes from providing for her mother and brother and enduring abuse to centering her entire life around providing for herself and her child, separated from her previous life. The only consistent thread between the two parts of her life is her work, which is a constant, but she has evolved past expectations for fallen women—she's unwilling to give up her relationship with her child and makes time for him as she works. Her life changes from one of sacrifice to one with the choice to nurture her family and her goals for herself.

Despite this lack of reliance on fulfilling the expectations of respectability and virtue for Victorian women, Nelly's position as a single mother is a precarious one. The first half of the nineteenth century, as Eileen Yeo explains, was a time in which even state policy embraced the idea of "mov[ing] women workers from the public labor force into the home, where they would not only redeem their families but also rescue their social class by wooing their menfolk away from public houses and political agitation" (41). While the character of Nelly fulfills the expectation of working within the home rather than in the public labor force, she is not in a position to woo any men away from what may otherwise get them into trouble. Some factors were out of the control of single women and as Yeo argues, "...Single women were caught in constraints of their own making. Their movement in new directions, if they did not want to step beyond the pale of respectability, entailed real limitations as well as avenues of advance" (53). Nelly was constrained once her pregnancy became visible, but she was able to secure

advancement once her trousers were being worn in public and promoted by a male officer in the Salvation Army. He had tried to get her work with her previous sweater but was unable to do so. Her avenue of advancement was reliant on her work becoming known by being shown to those who would purchase her work; those who were unfamiliar with what was viewed as her transgression of illegitimate pregnancy. This problematic position persisted, as Yeo asserts: “Single mothers persisted as an outlaw category right up until the second wave of the women’s liberation movement starting in the 1960s, and arguably even now” (53). Regardless of her perfectionism and attention to detail with her needlework, Nelly was treated as an outlaw in her community and avoided entirely. Despite this backlash, Nelly was proud of her son following his birth and not even the critical eye of her community could diminish her joy and hope for the future. Only after his death does she feel the sting of her outlawed status once more—with his death she has lost the purpose she chose to embrace regardless of public scrutiny.

The Virtue of Sacrifice and Ministry to the Poor

Sacrifice was honored throughout the Victorian period as a trait that all women should aspire to,⁹¹ including those in the working-class, but this act of sacrifice can be subversive as well. As Rappoport argues, sacrifice can be a tool to build community: “Some see sacrifice as little more than a socially conditioned response to nineteenth-century conduct books that defined women as “relative” creatures and advised them to

⁹¹ Mary-Catherine Harrison asserts that “‘sacrificial sensibility’ was prominent during the first half of the nineteenth century, promoted not only by Christian sermons and tracts, bestselling novels and poetry, published eulogies and biographies of great men and women, accounts of war and empire, self-help manuals and housekeeping guides, treatises of political economy, the history of art, and literary criticism” (372).

forget their own needs in order to better serve their husbands, fathers, and sons... Yet sacrifice... is more than a condition of diminished selfhood or a necessary evil of Victorian separate spheres ideology" (2). Nelly sacrifices her familial relationships to have a romantic interlude with Arthur Grant and she sacrifices her relationship with her mother and brother willingly and with more permanence to create a stronger bond with her son. She sacrifices her concerns about pride by getting her son Christened and takes him out into the streets to relish the many compliments he receives. Her sacrifice of shame attached to being fallen and having a child out of wedlock helps her build a community for herself. It is only after her son's tragic death that she sadly bears the marks of shame again.

Characters such as Father O'Hara and the Sweater's Wife provide the perfect examples of this problematizing of the sacrificial virtue. The Sweater's Wife acts as if she is making a sacrifice by enduring the hands that work for her. She makes distinctions among the poor, vilifying the "wicked poor" and those able to afford meat for their home tables: "[She] ground down hands who could not afford to be independent. She talked about the wickedness of 'the poor,' as though a gulf were fixed between the people who can afford a butcher's bill and those who can only buy meat once a week in a Saturday market. According to her, hands were all bad; they drank, they pawned trousers, they were idle and good-for-nothing" (Harkness 66). She thinks of herself as sacrificial and virtuous, although she rules with no compassion and instills fear in those she manages. In this statement the Sweater's Wife, like much of Victorian society, does not recognize the sacrifices of the working-class to perform their work. She thinks of them as a collective

wasted lot that exists beneath her and is unable to see that their sacrifice is so great that idleness is impossible. Following her failed with Arthur, the father of her child, she refuses to take holidays. Nelly is the ideal foil to this stereotype since she is always at work and even while parenting her machine is always going.

This sacrificial virtue is problematic with the presence of the church in the novel as well as its officials. As a priest, Father O'Hara should be the most sacrificial of all, but again and again he does not take opportunities to give to his community. When an elderly beggar woman approaches both Nelly and Father O'Hara for some money, Nelly gives to her with graciousness while Father O'Hara judges her and rejects the opportunity to assist her, providing a critique of Catholicism. When given the opportunity to be inclusive of Nelly when she goes to get her baby dedicated to the church, Father O'Hara separates her from the other parents to one side of the church, intentionally isolating her. Nelly shares what little food she has with the community and visits older couples in the buildings. Father O'Hara is known for his reputation of coming to the Buildings to shame those in his community and deliver righteous anger, but never to meet them with any compassion or real guidance. Even as he gives last rites to Nelly's disabled friend Susan he does not wait for her to die before giving the rites and gives no comfort to her longtime lover who is mired in grief with her loss: "Having done that, he left the room, followed by the acolyte, without taking any notice of the sobbing shoeblack or speaking a word to Nelly" (Harkness 103).⁹² His role in the community should be to, at the very least, acknowledge

⁹² In her notes, Sparks establishes that an acolyte is an assistant to the priest, usually a young man training for the priesthood (Harkness 103).

the grief of those in this congregation, but instead he ignores this pain and prioritizes the training of his pupil instead.

The Problematic Nature of Restored Virtue and Marriage

Scholars tend to be in agreement that the last scene of *A City Girl* provides a happy ending to a novel that is otherwise bleak, both for Nelly and the other characters—she is restored to virtue now that she is chosen for marriage and she has lost the tangible evidence of her fall: her son. John Southerland maintains that “George takes [Nelly] back and makes an honest woman out of her” (126). Similarly, John Goode is in agreement that the conventional ending of the novel includes “a ‘happy’ individual ending” (58). Nelly’s coming move to a rural place of peace and the amelioration of her circumstances by doing so is the prominent focus of Ledger’s criticism on the piece (170). Only two critics, Sparks and Rob Breton, acknowledge a different interpretation of this scene as less than happy. Breton argues that “Nelly trudges on, slipping into another loveless and unpromising union” (30). I assert, however, that this return to virtue through her coming marriage to George and life in the country is neither a tidy nor happy ending. Ultimately it reveals the consequences of returning to previously held ideals of virtue for women in Victorian society. By passively agreeing to the arrangement of moving to the country with George, she is giving up the community she established with her woman friend from the Salvation Army, the independence of her own sweated labor, despite the strain, compassion and companionship as she grieves the loss of her son, and familiarity with the area. She is giving up any possibility of another relationship that may be more fulfilling for her.

A previous scene in the novel, when Nelly was on the way to the cemetery and tending to baby Arthur for the last time, establishes the ending of her narrative. At the end of the novel, Nelly is stuck in the past—wishing that baby Arthur could have gone with George and herself to live on the countryside. While Nelly’s virtue is restored by way of marriage, she longs for the time when she was most out of favor with previous Victorian standards—unwed, working as a single mother, and shunned by the broader community. Further, while she will be removed from the toil of (as close to the heaven she describes for Arthur she can attain on earth), she would be without compassion and understanding for her grief. George’s dismissal of her confession that she wished the baby could join them in the country indicates her future isolation.

In keeping with the pressures of the end of the Victorian period for unwed women in the working classes to marry, Nelly decides to marry George, but this choice comes at the expense of the possibility of love and isolation in her grief. The expectations for unwed working-class women regarding marriage were especially great, as Joan Perkin clearly indicates: “In fact, spinsterhood became more rare in the working class as the century progressed; at the end, 88 percent of women got married. Their sexual and economic vulnerability, their desire for respectability and security, and their longing (in many cases) for children, combined with the growing ideal of romantic love to place great pressure on them to marry” (184). The possibility or even desire to have more children with George is ambiguous at the end of the novel. This ambiguity demonstrates another concrete way in which Nelly is still removed from traditional expectations in terms of longing for children. In her case she longs for her child that has died rather than

the beginning of a new family: “‘I was only thinking how nice it would have been to have baby down in the country,’ said Nelly” (Harkness 126). Her wish that she could have had baby Arthur with her in the country is telling—a life in even what seems to be an ideal place is incomplete. Clearly the marriage they are entering into is not based on love, at least on Nelly’s part. The lack of sympathy from George when she reveals her grief and his agreement to let bygones be bygones because he cannot go alone reveals that the marriage is more of a business arrangement rather than a union made for love (Harkness 126). At the end of the novel, Nelly is accepting a life of more security in a more desirable environment. She will be made respectable again in the view of society—where they are going, no one has to know of her illegitimate child. Despite this access to a clean slate, her final line in the novel is a wish for her child to have been with her in the country. In this most subtle of ways, her character is not fully accepting a life of respectability again; a life of respectability would require her to be silent in her grief. Returning to this virtuous life would mean abandoning the memory of her son and hiding his existence. A small resistance is at play, but resistance nonetheless that she mentions baby Arthur, knowing how desperately George wants to forget she had been an unwed mother. This embrace of her past life and unwillingness to let the memory of her child go establishes a rejection of the virtues of respectability. This scene at the end of the novel calls into question the flaws that come with respectability and domesticity for women, chiefly the self-denial and sacrifice women were expected to willingly participate in during the Victorian period.

Along with the problematic nature of this marriage to George, she sustains losses of the community she created following her pregnancy. While small and quite different from what she had established in the Katherine Buildings, she would, in effect, be removed from all she had ever known. George was unwilling, when given the chance, to acknowledge the ability of women to have multiple relationships that were sexual, or even multiple loves. The only reference he makes to her past love was, “You’ll have to come along with me, Nell. We’ll let bygones be bygones, and get married” (Harkness 126). By making this statement, he removes her agency by demanding she come along and stating they will get married without giving her a choice. This reference to letting bygones be bygones implies that she will leave behind that which belonged to an earlier time; in this case, her choice to have more than one sexual relationship or love. Nelly demonstrates agency and choice when she agrees to meet Arthur at the river, and they had a sexual relationship that resulted in the birth of her son. Nelly had agency in this scenario because she acted to produce the result of fulfilling her fantasies with Arthur. George’s denial of her agency to participate in multiple sexual relationships/loves marks another anticipated loss for Nelly—the ability to pursue relationships with the freedom of being single and the autonomy that accompanied that position. Her separation from this progressive ideal and respect would set her back into an environment where her experience would be ignored and invalidated. She would be isolated from her community and the opportunity to make a living independently.

Conclusion: A Future for Working-Class Women

In his 1903 text *People of the Abyss*, Jack London posed these questions regarding future generations in the East End of London: “But what of the daughters? Living like swine, enfeebled by chronic innutrition, being sapped mentally, morally, and physically, what chance have they to crawl up and out of the Abyss into which they were born falling?” (London). The character of Nelly actively showed readers of the time the imminent risks and drawbacks of domesticity and marriage and revised our critical understanding of women at the end of the Victorian age. As the burgeoning New Woman movement was coming to fruition and Harkness and her contemporaries were actively pursuing the goal of more political involvement for women, *A City Girl* accentuates the virtues of self-reliance, female companionship, and romance at will. The novel is a cautionary tale that reveals the consequences of and details the sadness of choosing the previous model of domesticated life. At her strongest point in the novel she is unmarried and proud enough to walk the streets with her child in the best finery she could produce. She was reliant on her own work once again and had shed the burden of her cruel mother and brother. These choices show progress for Victorian texts; Nelly does not die but undergoes a death of self and any independence to live a life with George. While Nelly does not quite embody the advancement of the New Woman, Victorian readers were exposed to some progress. She came out of poverty with what appears to be a much more stable life ahead of her on the countryside with marriage to George, unknown and therefore unblemished by her previous reputation. The novel abruptly ending with only a plan for a marriage rather than the reader seeing it come to fruition is telling. Harkness

denies readers glorification of marriage at the end of the novel as well as the excitement with which it is usually anticipated; it is a far more tenuous arrangement for Nelly. With the loss of her independence, work, and imaginings, she is unable to avoid an entirely new abyss. This is a less positive ending than the others—expectations for women in terms of gender roles were changing at this point in Victorian culture, and this is reflected in the text. Women were increasingly disenchanted with the idea of marriage and less satisfied with aspiring to it. They began to see the possible negative outcomes of marriage rather than the idealized versions they had been presented with and desired more autonomy than marriage would allow. This less positive outcome directly connects with women embracing more self-reliance and autonomy than seeking for provision from a marriage.

CHAPTER VI

EMERGING REVISIONS: MAKING SPACE FOR WORKING WOMEN'S
NEGLECTED LABOR IN VICTORIAN STUDIES

At its heart, the demonization of the working class is the flagrant triumphalism of the rich who, no longer challenged by those below them, instead point and laugh at them...working class people have, in the past, organized to defend their interests; they have demanded to be listened to, and forced concessions from the hands of the rich and powerful. Ridiculed or ignored though they may be, they will do so again. (Jones 269)

In these closing lines of Owen Jones's cultural study of the modern working class in Britain, he refers to the demonization of the working class and the consequences of this mistake. From the Victorian age until today, the working class continues to be demonized, othered, and exploited for the gains of industry, in Britain and other parts of the world. The most misunderstood and exploited of these workers are women and people of color. Working class women's contributions and voices are still silenced and excluded, just as many working women's voices were in the Victorian period. This neglect of recognition for working-class women's contributions extends to working-class women's autobiographies as well. Florence Boos asserts that few working-class women's autobiographies have been preserved: "Although we are fortunate to have even these records of the lives of Victorian working-class women, doubtless many more were composed but not preserved" (292). The topic I explore for my dissertation project is intended to ignite a fresh line of inquiry into working-class women represented in

literature. Such analysis deepens our understanding of working women's roles in the nineteenth-century, especially by considering new categories of labor such as those I have introduced; protective labor, healing labor, labor of visions and fantasy, and virtuous labor, this last of which establishes that virtue persists even with women in the workplace. The intended outcome of this project is to disrupt middle-class ideals with working class realities, using literary analysis to help us re-see working class women with a new critical focus and recognize the ways in which they creatively expand gender and class roles despite the profound constraints placed upon them.

This dissertation grew out of a desire to expand the critical conversation on working-class women beyond paid and domestic labor; to create recognition for the possibilities of labors that have remained underexamined in literary studies. Since most recent studies examine working class masculinities, I want to contribute a focused analysis on working-class women to the field of Victorian Studies. Despite the historically significant contribution to industry that women made, the full extent of their work has yet to be uncovered. In part, my aim is to bring neglected women's writing to the forefront not only of recovery work, but of critical conversation as well. Harkness and Burnett's works add a rich layer of representation for working-class women in literature with their focus on the sweated laborer and the mining woman. While representations of factory women are common in Victorian literature,⁹³ main female characters who mine or participate in sweated labor are less common. Our understandings of 20th and 21st

⁹³ While factory women are more commonly at the forefront of condition of England novels, Patricia Johnson reminds us that, even so, readers don't usually see them at work (2).

century women's experiences have been enhanced by taking into account work such as the "second shift" and emotional labor. What hidden lives of 19th century working-class women can be uncovered by consideration of their underexamined labors? Ultimately, with attention to these neglected labors, we can gain a new perspective on the working class and give the study of working women more equal footing through this effort.

Adrienne Rich asserts the need for revising our thinking regarding women's contributions and emphasizes using our privilege to uncover these women's roles:

Every one of us here in this room has had great luck—we are teachers, writers, academicians; our own gifts could not have been enough, for we all know women whose gifts are buried or aborted. Our struggles can have meaning only if they can help to change the lives of women whose gifts—and whose very being—continue to be thwarted. (21)

Working class women of the Victorian age, like the working-class women of today, have many gifts that still require uncovering. The lives of Victorian working-class women can no longer be changed, but their gifts and contributions to their culture, industry, and Victorian England can be recognized, and this is important work. Studies of the working class that were conducted during the Victorian period are largely focused on men, as is much of the criticism produced today. We may never know the full extent of their gifts, as Rich so aptly asserts, but we can begin to analyze how they were presented in fictional novels with this new critical lens of proposed labors. This effort will leave room for considering the other ways working women in Victorian literature expand the boundaries of gender and class and disrupt these systems as an internal force. Eventually I would like to expand these categories of labor and apply them to women of other classes and explore

the intersections of race and class as well. Race studies have been largely limited to those of Irish or Italian descent, and critical studies should expand to include other races in Victorian literature as well.

Moving Away from the Canon

My research objectives for this project were to create new categories of women's labor and answer the question of what we could gain from considering women's contributions to the working class and to literature through these new lenses. I endeavored to examine how those representations of their roles in literature change our understanding of working women and the constraints placed on them in the Victorian period. This work will certainly inform my future scholarship, and my hope is that it will shape that of others as well. I have included what can be considered canonical works by Dickens and Gaskell in these chapters; however, I assert that these works' working-class women characters can and should be considered with these new categories of labor. Even a text as well-mined as *Mary Barton* (1848) yields more nuanced understanding when examined for these categories of labor. I also explore works by women authors that are rarely or never included in the canon of Victorian literature. As a Victorianist, I myself have never been in a course focused on Victorian literature that included any work by Harkness or Burnett. The prevalence of male authors, specifically those considered canonical, are still creating the fundamentals of literary studies in Victorian literature classes.

Another advantage of examining these novels is a new appreciation of these authors and their narratives; instead of portraying the working-class as an uncivilized

representation of “the masses,” these authors created characters in the working-class that have some autonomy and individuality, characters that expand the confines of gender and class during the period. The efforts of these novelists to portray certain women of the working-class not as objects of pity or only as wives and mothers is significant—it opens the door for readers to make a connection to a character very different from the middle-class reader experience. For Dickens specifically, I argue that this examination reveals working class characters that deviate from the grotesques and comical, over-the-top characters he created. Exploring women’s labor in Frances Hodgson Burnett’s work diversifies her contributions to the field—widely appreciated for her children’s novels including *The Secret Garden* and *Little Lord Fauntleroy*, this project only begins the work of analyzing her working-class women characters. Joan Lowrie blurs the lines of gender and class, and an extensive study of her novels could identify other working-class women who perform these expansions of their roles. Margaret Harkness has an entire body of work that has been largely excluded from literary criticism, and some of her work has just recently been compiled into an archive. What little criticism exists is focused on the presence of socialism and radicalism in her novels. Applying these categories of labor to her work creates a new way analyzing her fiction as well as her representation of working women. While Elizabeth Gaskell is known for her sympathetic portrayal of the working class, she is also frequently associated with privileging maternal roles in her texts. Examining the ways in which she places characters that deviate from these expectations and common gender roles results in a new critical understanding of her work. Not only does she portray the working class sympathetically, but also with some

autonomy in unexpected places. Unearthing these texts that are rarely if ever included will help scholars of Victorian literature, and working-class scholars alike, gain a more detailed understanding of the social position of working-class women and how they were depicted in literature that was widely consumed at the time and in later years. This focus will provide working-class women in with more complex representation in Victorian literature. It will bring working women into focus in a field that largely privileges middle-class women and men in literature. Reclaiming these little-known novels brings women's writing to the forefront of the critical conversation. Examining these categories of labor helps us to consider a new way of thinking about women characters and labor that dismantles the separate spheres ideology that was upheld for nineteenth century women.

Working-class women still require much needed attention and critical consideration, even in the modern day. Owen Jones indicates the neglect that is still possible for working class women with his inclusion of juxtaposed stories of missing girls. Madeline McCann, the middle-class girl that had gone missing, was given ample attention and exhaustive resources for the search. Shannon, the working-class girl who disappeared, was largely neglected and while she was eventually found, the search for her was neither prioritized or well-regarded: "The working-class residents of Dewsbury Moor were certainly painfully aware of the reasons behind the lack of interest in Shannon Matthews" (17). In his 2011 text, Jones illuminates continued class conflict, and ultimately public attitudes toward the working class that have not changed drastically from the Victorian period. While its easy to think the values of the Victorians in terms of

their ideology of the deserving/undeserving poor are relics of the past, Britain still holds a privileged place for conservatism. In 2019, and increasingly beforehand, there has been a return to conservatism in Britain that hearkens back to the Victorian ideology of the deserving and undeserving poor. The 1993 “Back to Basics” campaign led by John Major championed self-reliance for the poor. Influenced by Major and those like him, Daniel Hannon, a Conservative member of Parliament who also serves as a journalist, considers poverty not as something to be eradicated, but rather the “primordial condition of all living organisms, including humans” (Hannon). He associates corruption and poverty as primordial conditions and asserts that the alternative to poverty is “more trade. More specialization. More globalization. The wider we extend the web of exchange, the more people we lift out of poverty” (Hannon). He seems to forget in this tirade the consideration of access and autonomy. How can specialization occur without means and access? To consider poverty primordial and therefore as natural a condition as existence discounts the lived experience of those experiencing poverty and life in the working class. This dissertation, in bringing working-class women to the forefront of the critical conversation, will, in one small way, bridge the gap in understanding that remains between classes.

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